


Accepted by the Graduate Faculty, Indiana University South Bend, in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Liberal Studies.


Joseph Chanley, Ph.D.
(Project Advisor)

Woman (In White)


Monica Tatchell, Ph.D.
(Committee Chair)


Frances Skerwood, M.A.

Susan McMinn Pantoja

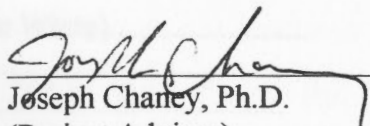
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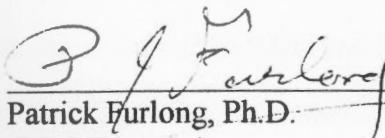
I. Introduction

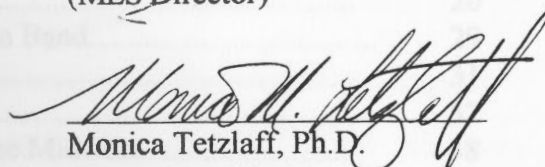
The Serpent Concoction and The Woman
An Oria Mae and The Woman (In White)
The Woman (In White)

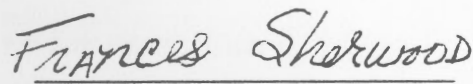

Joseph Chaney, Ph.D.
(Project Advisor)

II. The Maiden

The Scar
Smashing Pumpkins before They Were a Band
The Lachrima Tale
Butterfly
Afternoon on a Porch; Somewhere in the
Irish Divorce


Patrick Furlong, Ph.D.
(MLS Director)


Monica Tetzlaff, Ph.D.
(Committee Chair)


Frances Sherwood, M.A.

III. The Mother

Raymond and Roseanna
Woman (In White)
Birdscape
The Red Wagon
Mother's Day

IV. The Cross

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April 27, 1999

Woman (In White)

Table of Contents

I. Introduction

The Serpent Connection and The Woman (In White).....	4
<i>An Gorta Mor</i> and The Woman (In White).....	11
The Woman (In White).....	15

II. The Maiden

The Scar.....	20
Smashing Pumpkins before They Were a Band.....	29
The Lammas Tale.....	31
Butterfly.....	37
Afternoon on a Porch: Somewhere in the Midwest.....	38
Irish Divorce.....	39

III. The Mother

Raymond and Roseanna.....	41
Woman (In White).....	65
Birthscape.....	67
The Red Wagon.....	68
Mother's Day.....	79

IV. The Crone

Wolf Walk.....	82
Field of Violets.....	96

Introduction

I am a poet and storyteller, or *seanachie*, the Gaelic word for storyteller. My stories and poems examine themes of race, ethnicity, gender roles, class conflict, and the role of Celtic pre-Christian spiritual practices and their resurgence in American society. It is only over the last few years as the spouse of a Chicano social scientist that I began making sociological connections with these themes that kept recurring in my stories and poems. Soon after my marriage I began realizing that my voice had validity and I was not imagining the invisible boundaries that are sometimes drawn between people of a different race or ethnicity, gender, social class, or religion.

The first episode that brought about this realization was when I was pregnant with our child and a doctor, after asking me what the ethnic origin of my last name was, refused to take me as a patient because he thought I was receiving welfare benefits. I was indignant with this doctor assuming I was on welfare status, when in fact my husband and I had excellent insurance through our mutual employer. Needless to say I fired this doctor. The second episode was an incident at our workplace during my pregnancy. One woman when she saw me eating a taco claimed that I would "turn into one of them" if I kept eating food like that. This same woman often said that having a brown baby would be unfair to the child and she hoped the baby would look more white like me. The third and most painful incident was also at our workplace where I worked as a letter carrier for the U.S. Postal Service. When my white male manager found out I was pregnant, he would work me longer hours carrying a thirty pound mail bag. One afternoon I went home bleeding profusely, and I feared I was losing my baby. I called work and told them I had a medical emergency, and briefly described what was happening to me. The male supervisor said, "Maybe it would be for the best if you lost the baby," and hung up on me. I was stunned beyond words. Things like this don't

routinely happen to a white woman, and I had a pervading sense that a white woman like myself shouldn't feel racial boundaries so sharply, or sometimes so painfully, but I was beginning to experience racism from people who had previously treated me well. My husband treated these events as if they were routine for a person of color, and sometimes couldn't see why I was so upset. Fortunately, I survived these incidents, and gave birth to Stephen Gabriel Pantoja on July 18, 1992. He is the subject of my poem *Woman(In White)*, which is also the title of this project.

During my pregnancy with Stephen I began reading works by the new Chicana writers: Gloria Anzaldua, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Sandra Cisneros, Demetria Martinez, and Ana Castillo. These were writers from my own generation born in the late 1940's and 1950's. These writers began gaining powerful voices in the politically conservative climate of the early 1980's. Their voices were honest and cut beneath the distinctions of skin color. Gloria Anzaldua suggests that white people need to own the fact that they have looked upon Chicanos as less than human, as stealing their land, their personhood, their self-respect. At first I was angry that I was being lumped together with all white people, conscious as I was of my own Irish ancestry and the hardships my ancestors endured during the Famine in the 1840's under the British -- the Great Hunger, or *an Gorta Mor*, as it is referred to in Ireland. I saw oppression more as a class conflict between different racial or ethnic groups.

Hunger. The word conjures up many types of hunger besides physical deprivation and starvation. An intense curiosity to know about my own ancestral roots inspired me to study my ancestors who have lain silent in their graves over the last 150 years since the Famine. I began to discover through my explorations and research that there are similarities between the oppression experienced by Chicanos, Native Americans, Jews, African Americans and Irish Americans. As I read essays written by Irish Americans and Native Irish I wondered why such a silence envelopes the Famine of 1845-1851. Why is

this historical episode which claimed the lives of two million Irish Gaelic-speaking peasants silenced in our textbooks? In fact, silenced by the Irish themselves, as if our arrival on American shores due to the Famine had been shrouded in shame. I thank Gloria Anzaldua and the other Chicana writers who helped me rediscover the pain of my ancestry. I don't want to ever forget my ancestors who died. To forget is to perhaps risk repeating the atrocities leveled at another member of the human race.

Anzaldua believes that whites should ally with Chicanos and find connections with our stories, folk tales, and shared histories. I find this is the camp in which I belong also. I believe that shared stories, folk tales, and histories of all cultures reveal universal themes about the human condition. As a writer it is my hope to reveal the ways in which we are more alike than different through my stories and poems. As a high school English teacher it is one of my goals to teach my students that we need to find the connections that bring us together as human beings, and look beyond different racial or ethnic backgrounds. Out of these ideals *Woman (In White)* was created. I thank the many Chicana writers who helped me discover my voice and history as an American of Irish ancestry. In the words of Irish poet Seamus Heaney:

*Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.*

And so I began digging with my pen because I do not want ever to forget.

The Serpent Connection and The Woman (In White)

In 1977 I had a dream that I was deep in a jungle in the Yucatan. I walked through the sweltering jungle, pushing damp, thick foliage out of my path. I wore no shoes. Brightly colored birds flew around my head, following me as I walked deeper and deeper into this jungle. The path was narrow but began widening the farther I walked. I was exhausted from walking and rested under a tree. My eyes were half closed when I saw a large green, red, and yellow serpent undulate towards me with emerald green eyes. I wasn't afraid. The serpent stood up and its mouth slowly opened revealing large fangs. I stood up facing the serpent and placed my right hand into its mouth. The serpent bit down gently on my hand and my body was filled with a tingly vibration that shook my whole body. I remained standing and looked the serpent in the eyes. Finally, the serpent released my hand, entwined itself around my feet and slithered away into the jungle. I looked at my hand and there was no wound from the serpent's bite. The following morning I woke up and felt a strange pressure on my right hand throughout the day. My vision and hearing had more clarity after this dream. Ordinary objects took on new characteristics that I would have previously ignored. I realized that I had made a bid for knowledge, which to many people of Celtic ancestry, means that you have made a private pact between yourself and your spiritual source to learn from that spiritual source in your own way without the intervention of a priest or other religious authority.

Interestingly, it has been said that no country in Europe is so associated with the serpent as Ireland, and none has so many myths and legends connected with serpents. Pre-Christian Irish crosses are entwined with serpents. These equal-armed crosses with a

circle around them can be seen in many Irish graveyards. The equal-armed cross symbolizes the four directions. Each direction is associated with an element in nature: north is earth, east is air, south is fire, and west is water. Furthermore, each element is also associated with a human trait. An object representing each direction is placed on a Celtic pagan altar seen in some Irish homes. The direction of north is associated with things in the material world such as our possessions, our homes, our land, and our rituals concerning food. On my altar I have a small cauldron representing this direction. The direction of east is the realm of the intellect. East is concerned with books, scholarship, wisdom, truth, and justice. An athame, or small sword, is the object used to represent this direction. Also the burning of incense takes place in this direction. South is a fiercely gentle direction associated with passion, inspiration, and leisure. A large pillar-type candle is used to represent this direction. Finally, the west represents compassion, sensitivity, the mystical, and the direction in which we end our lives on earth. A chalice filled with spring water represents this direction. The circle wrapped around the directions represents the eternal Spirit of all things in the universe. To me the Spirit is the world that *Woman (In White)* inhabits, which is a world of imagination, knowledge, faith, and trust that some day all will be well with the world.

The serpent, *nathair*, is associated with the wisdom of the ancient Irish. *Nathair* represents transformation, healing and life energy. The learned Druids and Druidesses would exclaim, "I am a serpent" (Bonwick, 1986:186). "I am serpent" means that the Druids and Druidesses were the keepers of spiritual and mystical knowledge. They were held in reverence by the ancient Irish, and were feared by outsiders. Druids and Druidesses were the people who had the courage or calling to make a bid for knowledge.

Unfortunately, the myths of Ireland have been all but wiped out by Christianity. Saint Patrick is venerated because he drove all the serpents out of Ireland, but in an earlier time the serpent was associated with power and knowledge. On February 2,

Imbolc pagan festivals are held all over Ireland honoring Saint Brighid (Bride) who tended the sacred wells with her nineteen female followers. Many of the wells held hundreds of serpents used for religious purposes. Brighid is the sacred goddess of wells, water, fire and creativity. Even Christianized Gaelic hymns retain Brighid's connection to the serpent:

*Early on Bride's morn
Shall the serpent come from the hole,
I will not harm the serpent,
Nor will the serpent harm me.* (Carr-Gromm, 1994:65)

The arrival of Christianity has not, however, suppressed the veneration and respect many hold for Saint Brighid. Brighid, before she was a sainted by the Catholic church, was already representative for the poor and the powerless. Many Irish and Irish American homes have a Saint Brighid's cross to protect the hearth and heart of the home.

In pre-Columbian America the most prevalent symbol was also the serpent. The ancient Olmecs associated womanhood with the serpent's mouth, which was considered the most sacred place on earth. The earth itself was viewed as a gigantic serpent, and the people followed the way of the serpent by identifying with it. As in Ireland, Christianity has attempted to wipe away traces of serpent veneration. The attempts have been unsuccessful even under the guise of pious Catholicism practiced by many Mexicans and Chicanos. To Mexicans on both sides of the border, the Virgin Guadalupe is a symbol of rebellion against the rich, upper and middle-class and their subjugation of the poor and the *indio* (Anzaldua, 1987: 30). When the Virgin Guadalupe appeared to the Indian Juan Diego in 1531, she appeared on the spot where the Aztec goddess *Tonantsi* had been worshipped. When the Virgin Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego she told him her name was *Maria Coatlatlopeuh*. *Coatl* is the Nahuatl word for serpent (Anzaldua, 1987: 29). Apparently Maria Coatlatlopeuh was friends with Brighid and her followers on the other side of the ocean.

As in many Irish homes where there is a Saint Brigid's cross, many Mexican homes have on their home altars a candle with the Virgin Guadalupe on it. Additionally, some Mexican homes also have a bowl of salt representing the north, a candle representing the south, copal incense for the east, and a glass of water for the west. After our son Stephen was born, we hired a Mexican woman to care for him while we worked. Many times I would find little slips of paper she would place on my altar with prayers on them for people she knew. After she left our employ, she gave me a beautiful Virgin Guadalupe candle for my altar. The story *Raymond and Roseanna* was inspired by an association I had with a Mexican woman and her husband while living in Arizona in the early 1970's. Obviously the European proclivity for civilizing people through Christianity apparently has not been as successful as they think in Mexico. It is clear that many people of Irish and Mexican ancestry prefer the non-rational, non-white, serpent world. It is the world of the visionary and the mystic and attempting to give that world a rational explanation would deny faith in the mysteries of life. The story *Wolf Walk* talks about the conflict between the rational and non-rational world, where the woman in white takes the guise of a she-wolf.

Gloria Anzaldua states that like many Indians and Mexicans, she did not deem her psychic experiences as real and denied their occurrences (Anzaldua, 1987: 36). I believe that the Celtic inclination for dreams, visions, and psychic experiences are far too often hushed away by a society that values the rational mind. Like Gloria Anzaldua I also tried to suppress my psychic experiences for fear of offending the majority of Christian members of our society. Matthew Arnold writes in his book, *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, twenty years after the Famine:

The childlike turbulent sentimentality of the Celt is ineffectual in political and economic spheres and finds its cultural value only when supplemented and disciplined by Anglo-Saxon steadiness. (Lloyd, ed. Hayden, 1997:39)

Charles Trevelyn of England, who implemented many of the laws that prevented the Irish from gaining relief from the famine in the 1840's, states:

The great evil with which we have to contend is not the physical evil of famine, but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people. (Golway, ed. Hayden, 1997:230)

The Irish are seen as turbulent, and not possessing rational thought. They are seen as primitive, child-like and uncivilized. Supposedly they live in the world of dreams, magic, the soul, and the imagination. Similarly some anthropologists also claim that Indians have primitive and deficient minds for many of the same reasons. Gloria Anzaldua suggests that many anthropologists make value judgments that Indians cannot think in the higher mode of consciousness -- rationality (Anzaldua, 1987:37). I believe that Indians and the Celts can inhabit both worlds, and are forced to switch between the two worlds. I call this "border walking," or walking between the worlds of the seen and the unseen.

I believe that we have more than five senses by which to perceive the world. The sixth sense is borne out of necessity for surviving in the rational world. I know the minute I walk into a room I can recognize the lingering emotions that are left over from the previous inhabitants. I can feel the thoughts of other people sometimes, and many times have startled someone by saying things they couldn't believe I could perceive about

them. My most distinct experiences revolve around being able to sense death. I remember in the early 1980's I shook my former father-in-law's hand and "heard" inside my head, "He won't be here in six months." Four months later he was dead. When I am writing I can hear the thoughts whispered by an outside source. Many times I will open a book to exactly a passage that I need for a paper that I am writing. This has happened many times while writing *Woman (In White)*. There is no rationality to these events because they are random and spring up spontaneously. There seems to be no explanation for this other than I do believe now that it is possible to operate outside the five senses. I no longer seek an explanation for this because it is now such a large part of who I am.

The woman in white is not only a part of me, but she also takes on a variety of guises. She appears out of seemingly ordinary events, such as lying in a bathtub, sitting in a hospital lounge, driving the car, watching the gardener prune flowers, peeling potatoes, or pulling a child's red wagon up the hill. As a writer, I strive to make these ordinary events extraordinary because they are infused with the touch of the woman in white, who operates as the spirit behind seemingly ordinary actions of daily life.

Spiritual awareness isn't always obvious, but can be seen or experienced in everyday events.

The last vivid dream I had about serpents took place in about 1994. I dreamed I was walking in a beautiful green field sparkling in the sun. I could see wells in the distance and beautiful rock formations. Pausing at one well I removed the cover and placed my hand down in the well where dozens of black snakes encircled my arm. I remained that way until one of the snakes brought me a cup filled with the most delicious water I have ever tasted. I drank from the cup, then threw the cup over my shoulder. I commanded the snakes back into the well, covered it and walked in a westward direction, never looking over my shoulder. The Irish believe that if you look over your shoulder you will never see or meet a person or situation again. If you look behind you, you close off opportunities to learn further from certain persons or situations. I want to keep my

opportunities open for meeting another serpent along my path. I don't believe the bid for wisdom is an easy path, because it takes courage. Confronting anything that tears the fabric of our everyday mode of consciousness and that thrusts us into a less literal and more psychic sense of reality increases awareness and *la facultad* (Anzaldua, 1987: 39). *La facultad* implies that you not only increase your awareness, but gain confidence to become your own authority when interpreting the world of the Spirit. This is not a path that everyone chooses, though ideally it is open to everyone. Many people feel they need another person to perform spiritual interventions for them, and are frightened by the thought of becoming their own authority. Becoming your own authority requires a lot of self-responsibility. It also requires discipline, patience, humility, and the vision that some day all human beings will lay down their differences and unite as one human race. *Woman (In White)* is her own authority and chooses to stand outside of society, yet be part of society at the same time. She attempts to help others find their own paths in life through her stories and poetry. If you listen carefully, you may sometimes hear the language of the spirit beneath her words.

An Gorta Mor and The Woman (In White)

All Ireland was a Belsen. The English governing class ran true to form. They had killed two million Irish people. The fact that the death toll wasn't higher was not for want of trying.

*-A.J.P. Taylor
Historian*

My living ancestors told no horrid famine tales. I can still see my grandmother taking pride in being able to peel potatoes and apples without wasting a bit. I remember seeing long ribbons of peel in the trash, thin as paper and all in one piece. My grandmother would give food away to people who were poorer than herself and her own thirteen children. My own mother who lives in a house in constant disrepair collects soda cans and puts money in an account for her four grandchildren, even though my brother and I are financially prosperous. Both my grandmother and mother were always giving away clothes and food to those less fortunate, a habit I continue. I even give away my children's old toys to daycare centers that serve the poor, and my children go with me when I make the donation. I remember in high school giving away my clothes to those less fortunate. When I used to deliver mail for a living, I would slip a twenty-dollar bill into the mail box of one of my poor customers, or quietly leave a case of baby food at the doorstep of the single mother trying to make ends meet. I prefer to do charitable acts anonymously and when the need crosses my path. While I wasn't raised with memories of famine stories, the memory must be embedded not only deep inside of me, but also

inside the people who raised me. In the words of James Carrol's *The Shawl of Grief*:

The Irish past is a gnarled scar, encrusted
around a still unhealed wound, a nightmare
around a horror as yet unnamed. The English
past, of course and equally, is a leprous
conscience festering around an unadjudicated
crime. (Carrol, ed. Hayden, 1997: 211)

Unfortunately, the Famine is not routinely taught in American high schools or universities. When it is taught it is presented as if it were an agricultural anomaly instead of ruthless political engineering by the British government to rid themselves of the Irish problem once and for all. History tells us how the starving Irish watched ships laden with food cross the Irish Sea to Britain while children with grass stained mouths watched. These ships bursting with Irish-grown grain, oats, and livestock left the harbors bound for England under heavily armed guard. These facts are not taught in any history class I have ever taken. The history books do acknowledge a potato blight in 1847 in Ireland that caused massive Irish flight to the United States. The history books applaud the humanitarian actions of the British who helped the starving Irish gain passage to the United States during the Famine. The Irish were packed in "coffin" ships like African slaves and transported to America. Many did not survive the journey across the ocean. History books also fail to mention how entire Irish families would bolt their huts, cover their windows, and huddle in the corner to cover their shame and die. Their hut would be torn down by British landlords to cover them and serve as the family grave. When the Irish arrived in America, they were not welcome either. NINA, No Irish Need Apply, signs would adorn the places where they hoped to gain employment. The tenements in which they lived in America were bad, if not worse, than the huts they had vacated in Ireland.

The Irish Famine of the 1840's is not yet part of our mass consciousness, but the fact is that over 2 million people died in the Famine. Of this 2 million, 90% were native Irish speakers and the poorest of the poor. This was the social class the British government chose to abuse and eliminate. The motive seems to be that the Gaelic speaking native Irish refused to give up their cultural beliefs and practices, and were a financial burden to the British government. A similar comparison can be drawn with the annihilation of the Native American populations in the Americas. It is important to bear in mind that these people, like the Native Americans, were powerless and posed no real threat to anyone.

It is part of our Celtic pride not to show defeat or submission to oppression. Many Irish would rather die, and many have died in modern times in their fight to get out from under British governance. The hunger strikes of IRA members and their leader Bobby Sands in the 1980's is an example of this belief. For some, the belief is "fall goeth before pride," a deliberate twist on the Biblical admonition that "pride goeth before fall." Perhaps it is deep in our memories to always have the pride and endurance to survive adversity. I believe that in the hearts of many Irish men, women, and children there is a yearning for freedom and a desire to fight for justice. Many believe, as I do, that the fight for social justice is a worthy one and will ultimately help others become free.

Once I understood *an Gorta Mor* I realized that suffering reaches beneath the color of one's skin. It truly does go deep within and can eventually kill not only your body, but your soul as well. My stories and poems in "Woman (In White)" were now beginning to take on not only a spiritual form, but a more substantive human form as well. The more I understood about my own ancestral history, the more the elusive quality of the woman in white began to take shape. The thoughts in my stories and poems were there, embedded in pre-Christian Irish history, and also in the not so distant

past of Irish Famine history. The cultural fabric that molded the lives of the Famine victims, in fact their very language, was being ripped seam by seam to force to them to fit the Anglo-Saxon idea of "discipline and steadiness."

One million Irish people emigrated to the United States in the 1840's in "coffin ships." Many did not survive the journey because of starvation and disease. In 1994 Ireland built a Famine Museum for all those who died during the Famine. The Choctaw Tribe in Oklahoma, who were forced from their land in 1831, donated money to the local Irish population for this project. The British, on the other hand, have commented in a patronizing tone, that Ireland's Famine Museum is nothing more than the Irish coming to terms with their history, absolving the British of having had anything to do with the Famine (Hayden, 1997: 145)

It is time now for *Woman (In White)* to take her position in telling the real story. The woman in white will tell the truth from a socio-historical stance interwoven with real life experiences.

The Woman (In White)

My mother was born in 1926, the fourth of thirteen children. She was the daughter of a poor tenant farmer in Virginia and grew up in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Her ancestry is part Irish and Cherokee Indian. They often lived in dilapidated rental houses, but they took pride in being clean. My father, on the other hand, was born in 1925, the third of eight children. His ancestry was Scotch-Irish. He was the son of a top executive in the textile industry in South Carolina. They lived in an eighteen room house and had many privileges growing up that my mother did not have. My parents' worlds often collided. I learned at an early age how to navigate walking in their two worlds. There was the world of my mother, which included trips to the Goodwill Store, cornbread, biscuits and gravy, buttermilk, truck drivers, swearing, and stubborn pride. What I remember most about growing up when visiting with her side of the family was the storytelling. What my mother's family lacked in formal education, they compensated for by being vivid and engaging storytellers. Educator Ruby Payne in her research on understanding poverty discovered that people from social backgrounds like my mother's family believe that their personality is their best social. Obviously, they don't have money. Consequently, the ability to entertain or tell stories and have a sense of humor are highly prized (Payne: 1998, 68). My father never joined these gatherings, but preferred to read in another room. He found my mother's side of the family crude and uneducated. In spite of his withdrawal, I would sit with my mother around the table at my grandparents' farmhouse late at night and join in the storytelling. Often the stories would turn to tales of the supernatural, dreams, premonitions, and omens seen in nature.

I believe this is how I inherited the Irish penchant for storytelling and the supernatural. One of the stories was about a woman in white. The "white ladies" in ancient Ireland were the women who had connections with ghosts and faeries and were direct descendants of the *Tuath De Danaans*. The *Tuaths* were skilled in magic, wizardry, divination, and wisdom, and introduced the ogahams, or Irish alphabet used by the Druids. I believe this is how I began creating my own version of who the woman in white really was.

After an evening of storytelling I would lie in my bed and visualize the woman in white. She was dressed in white, and had beautiful long reddish-gold hair. Her eyes were fog-gray and she was very tall. She would always be standing outside of her hut watching the path that led up to her house from the woods. I would run down the sunlit path toward her, but she would only silently stand and point one finger heavenward and one finger to the earth. Her bare feet, plunged into the soil, were rooted firmly as she stood watching me. She was part of the earth, yet her very being spoke of heaven and the world of the Spirit. Today, to me, she represents the pre-Christian ancient mother Goddess of Ireland, Danu, who watches over her children and keeps them safe from harm. Christian Catholics might interpret the woman in white as Mary the mother of God. I believe they are the same entity, but part of a different religious/spiritual theology.

My father's world was another story. He was a graduate from Rutgers University who fervently believed in higher education. He was a CPA by profession, but his world consisted of plays, movies, lectures, dance and the arts. He insisted that I take ballet and piano, and that when I went to high school that I would learn French. He was very influential in helping me recognize the importance of an education. He would often become exasperated with my mother's family, who had no interest in a higher education. Many of my female relatives from my mother's side were pregnant and married by fifteen or sixteen years of age. He was furious when one of my cousins, who was musically gifted on the cello, gave up a full music scholarship to get married. His family,

however, was a different story than my mother's family. They had absolutely no contact with him after he married my mother because of her social class. I never knew my relatives on my father's side of the family. The only time I met them was at his funeral in 1968 when I was twelve-years old. All I remember about them was that they were cold, austere, and very formal. Their clothes and cars were very expensive. Their southern accents were more formal and measured. In spite of how my father must have grown up, he taught us never to discriminate against people who were a different color or who didn't have as much materially as we did. He was very vocal in standing up for the rights of others, which didn't always make him a very popular person with our suburban neighbors during the civil rights movement of the 1960's. I believe that living in these two worlds has helped me be more consciously aware of the boundaries that separate people from one another, and has given me a sensitivity in expressing this when writing about this theme. The woman in white is adept at walking these social boundaries and works for social justice.

The woman in white can walk in both worlds. She can walk between the world of the living and the dead. Navigating boundaries in the corporeal world are not enough, and she strives to navigate in other waters outside the corporeal world as well. The woman in white walks these boundaries with wisdom, truth, and grace.

Finally, the woman in white will continue to haunt us as long as the human race continues to show signs of inhumanity and crimes against one another. As long as there is greed, ignorance, and violence the woman in white will always be here. I believe that the woman in white is a Goddess who is both creatrix and destroyer. Her ways are understood by understanding the laws of the natural world. The woman in white represents my own spiritual belief system that I have constructed out of my imagination based on my knowledge of the pre-Christian myths and legends of ancient Ireland. I believe the woman in white will not be released from earth until peace and understanding

have been restored. For now she serves as a reminder to help us heal our wounds. When the wounds are healed, she will move on to somewhere else where she is needed.

Finally, one day she will disappear like vapor drifting through the trees on an autumn morning, never to be seen again. On that day it will be as founding Methodist minister John Wesley observed in the 1800's at an Irish funeral:

I was exceedingly shocked at the Irish howl.
It was not a song, but a dismal, inarticulate yell,
set up at the grave by four shrill-voiced women.
I saw not one shed a tear.

The Celtic soul is wont to shrieking and wailing when something is ended and passing on from this world into the next. It is how the event or events are released and becomes a record of the universe. The Irish call this *keening*, and at some Irish funerals today professional *keeners* are hired for the deceased as they carry the body to be buried. Reverend Wesley did not understand this when he wrote those words, and many still do not understand the language of the soul.

I believe that some day even those who don't believe will feel the *sidh* blast through for the last time and the soft *ceal-sidh* sing as the woman in white disappears from the earth. I don't see that happening for a long time, but dreams can be constructed of fabric that can never be destroyed as long as they live in the hearts and souls of the people who believe in them. And so we begin.

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The Scar

The brown lawn whispers in the ear of the hot August wind that today would be my father's last day on earth. That was thirty years ago. As I think about him, in the distance the sound of boats return to the dock. There is the green of pulleys and the sound of sliding ropes through the hands of steady men — handsome ropes with bright shiny hooks swinging freely from the end, but they miss me. I look out over the expanse of bright blue that is Lake Michigan, sparkling brightly in the summer sunlight. My father never meant to be cruel, but he was desperate in the way he ruled our household. When he died, the whole house breathed a long overdue sigh of relief, and I was glad to see him go. The wind smells like rotten fish. It is time for me to go home now.

The evening before his funeral in August of 1958 I took a long bath. I had just turned thirteen-years old. The washrags were old and frayed. I was lying on my back in the water with a frayed brown washrag over my head. I decided to make a one-piece bathing suit with the washrag and throw it over my head. These washrags were larger than most because my mother used to cut up old towels and make them into rags. My father would yell at my mother that they had enough money to afford new washcloths, why the hell did she keep cutting up old towels and living like white trash? My father came from a fairly wealthy home. My mother, on the other hand, was the daughter of a poor tenant farmer. I didn't mind the washrags. They were perfect for me because I was very modest. From my position in the tub I could see my mother's razor on the rim of the tub. Actually it was my father's razor. She was probably using it now because he was dead and couldn't yell at her not to use it because it cut up his face. He used to get really pissed about that. I had been looking at her razor for a long time when I would take my baths. Today I decided would be the day I would use it for the first time. I sat up, carefully keeping the washrag in place, and slung my leg over the edge of the tub like my mother would when she lathered her leg with soap before shaving her legs.

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The evening before his funeral in August of 1968 I took a long bath. I had just turned thirteen-years old. The weather was much cooler after he died. I was lying on my back in the water with a frayed brown washrag over my body. I liked to make a one-piece bathing suit with the washrag and throw it over my body. Our washrags were larger than most because my mother used to cut up old towels and make them into rags. My father would yell at my mother that they had enough money to afford new *wash cloths*, why the hell did she keep cutting up old towels and living like white trash? My father came from a fairly wealthy home. My mother, on the other hand, was the daughter of a poor tenant farmer. I didn't mind the washrags. They were perfect for me because I was very modest. From my position in the tub I could see my mother's razor on the rim of the tub. Actually it was my father's razor. She was probably using it now because he was dead and couldn't yell at her not to use it because it cut up his face. He used to get really pissed about that. I had been looking at her razor for a long time when I would take my baths. Today I decided would be the day I would use it for the first time. I sat up, carefully keeping the washrag in place, and slung my leg over the edge of the tub like my mother would when she lathered her leg with soap before shaving her legs.

Carefully lathering my leg with pink Dove soap, I felt the scabs on my legs from a multitude of mosquito bites. Next, I grasped the razor and took my first tentative swipe at my leg with the blade creating an uneven ribbon up my shin. This wasn't so bad. Besides, the aunts had been insisting that I wear pantyhose for the funeral with my new sailor dress. I figured this was as good a time as any to shave my legs for the first time. I finished the first leg and started in on my other. Hell, if I had been an amputee like my father I would have been finished by now, I thought, as I admired my new hairless leg. He had lost his leg in Saipan during World War II laying communication wires. He said it looked just like spaghetti. That must have been disgusting I thought, as I started lathering my other leg and began shaving again. With the last swipe of the razor I gouged a section of skin from my shin. I could see the piece of skin hanging out of the razor. I bit my lip to keep from screaming as I swished the razor around in the water trying to loosen the skin from the blade. Putting my leg under water, I saw pinkish clouds rise to the top from the cut, and I pressed the washrag onto my skin not caring that I was now completely naked. Pulling the plug from the bathtub, I hopped over to the sink to get a Band-aid for the cut, vaguely wondering if it would leave a scar.

When I opened the medicine cabinet I saw my father's pills. I opened the first bottle and noticed only one pill at the bottom. They were his Thorazine pills for his psychotic episodes, and they made him happy. Next to those were his nitroglycerin pills for his heart, which was ravaged from two heart attacks. That bottle was also completely empty. The awareness of what my mother had told us about him taking his own life began to sink in. I knew the bottles shouldn't have been empty because I had gone to the drugstore with my mother the day before to pick up his prescription. I put the bottles back into the medicine cabinet. I must have stood in the bathroom staring in the medicine cabinet for a while because the blood running down my leg formed a pool between my big and second toe. Wiping the blood from the tile with toilet paper, I neatly applied a bandage. Catching a glimpse of my girlish body as I bent down in the mirror, I

swore that I would never get married. I also noticed my mother had bought scented, pink toilet paper. The kind my father absolutely detested. He had only been dead less than twenty-four hours and already my mother was using his razor and buying her kind of toilet paper.

The next day was the funeral. The band-aid I wore could clearly be seen through my pantyhose, but no one commented or even noticed. It was the first time I had ever worn hose and I hated them. On the way to the funeral I sat next to my mother, me on one side, and my nine-year-old brother on the other side. She was smoking another cigarette, when we suddenly smelled burning material inside the limousine somewhere in the back seat. We rummaged around in the seat and discovered that she had burned a gigantic hole in the upholstery with the ash from her cigarette. She was mortified and tried to stuff pieces of Kleenex she dampened with her spit to cover the hole. The driver didn't notice a thing as we continued on toward the church.

The cars were lined up behind the gleaming black limousine in which we rode ready to go to church for the funeral. I hated the sailor dress I was wearing. I really felt ugly next to my petite and beautiful mother, who looked like Jackie Kennedy, with my large feet and hands. We drove to the church, no one saying a single word with the smell of burning upholstery lingering like a bad breath in the back seat. My brother would cry now and then, and my mother would wipe his eyes and nose with a handkerchief, and stare dazedly straight ahead. I didn't cry and neither did my mother. We sat in the front pew of the church as the service began. One of the church members sang a hymn and my brother started sobbing out loud.

During the hymn, my thoughts turned to the morning when I knew he was dead. Something had woke me up in the middle of the night. It was as if there was a disturbance in the universe somewhere that needed my attention. Sitting up in bed I listened and heard the faint sound of voices in the hall. They seemed so far away, and I thought it was my parents returning from their night out. But I also I heard what sounded

like the squeak of wheels going down the hall outside the door. I knew the familiar creak of my father's crutches when he would walk down the hall, but this was a different sound.

Pushing the covers off of the bed onto the floor, I put one foot down on the damp tile to investigate. Suddenly I felt soft, invisible hands gently push me back down on my mattress and a clear, feminine voice advise me to go back to sleep. The soothing sound of the voice made me fall back to sleep instantly, which was unusual for me. Later I woke up when I felt my brother gently pushing on my shoulder for me to wake up. It was early morning before the birds sang and my brother was telling me he was frightened because no one was in the house. The dog wasn't even around. Sitting up and taking his small, boyish hand into mine, we began investigating the house calling our parents' names. There was no answer.

Finally, we went into their bedroom. No one was there. My father's crutches were neatly propped up next to the window and his glasses lay lens down on the nightstand, which was unusual. A glass of water was next to his glasses. There was an odd stain on the carpet next to his bed. The room smelled funny. The dog was cowering under the bed. Looking out the window, the woods looked damp and runny like an impressionist painting. The birds began singing as the sun rose slowly over the back yard. The soft hiss of the neighbor's sprinkling system turning on for the day caused the grass to glisten in the early sunlight. In the desolation of my parents' bedroom I held my brother's hand knowing he was dead. My brother finally asked me, "Is he dead?" I nodded my head and answered simply, "Yes, he is dead." We sat on their bed and waited for someone to come home. I noticed my brother's feet were black on the bottom from constantly going barefoot in the summer, and that the leaves on my father's birch tree outside the window were beginning to turn brown around the edges. We sat in silence a little while longer when my brother asked me, "How do you know he is really dead?" I answered, "I just know."

Later that morning my mother returned with the minister, Reverend Windler, from the Methodist church. She had been crying. She hugged us both as we sat down and quietly told us that at around 3:00 that morning she had heard my father fall from their bed. She had tried to revive him, but could not. She called an ambulance, but it was too late because he was already dead. Reverend Windler nodded to her and she continued, "Your father chose to take his own life," she said flatly. My brother and I didn't say a word in response. I asked her, to change the subject, about the stain on the carpet and she replied, "Honey, when people die they sometimes go to the bathroom in their pants." She stood up, lit a cigarette and started making coffee. Reverend Windler said for her to call him if she needed anything as he left. She nervously moved around the kitchen, and dropped a spoon. So, that explained the smell.

As the day wore on the house became like a tremendous beehive filled with mostly female relatives from my mother's side of the family. My father's family didn't acknowledge his death or attend the funeral. Instead they sent a terse note with their heartfelt condolences and sent a spray of lurid orange and yellow gladiolas to the funeral home. My mother had shared with me one time while we were driving out to my grandparent's farmhouse that after she married my father his parents wouldn't let her into their house. They didn't like the fact that my father had married some poor white trash girl from the Blue Ridge Mountains. I remember her lips tightened revealing the lines on her face under her make-up as she related the rest of the story. She and my father had slept together in his Oldsmobile under a large magnolia tree just off his parents' property. They left the next morning, and my father rarely if ever spoke about his family. My mother also confided to me that my father's mother was extremely religious and used to beat her kids soaking wet in a bathtub with a strap in the name of the Lord. His mother had also supposedly witnessed one of her brothers kill another brother with an ax in the barn on their plantation. I didn't know if my mother was making that part of the story up or not because she had a vivid and dramatic way of telling a story. Nevertheless, my

father's family didn't sound like people I even wanted to know. Even with all of their money they sounded miserable. They never gave us the time of day, and his funeral was no different.

The men from my mother's side stayed outside as the aunts helped prepare my mother for the funeral the next day. They all put their clothes in my mother's bedroom and got dressed in there as well. They all carefully avoided the stain on the carpet, and I knew they already knew what it was by the way they whispered every time they had to walk around it. They talked about how awful it was for my mother to be widowed so young. She had just turned forty-two years old. My father had only been a year older than my mother. Privately I thought my mother would be better off without my father. Things were so much easier when he wasn't there. My father was the type of man who liked to be organized, keeping calendars around for every little thing. He was a perfectionist and loathed disorder of any kind. He would fly into a rage if we were five minutes late getting ready for an occasion. One time for my brother's Cub Scouts awards banquet he had thrown the carefully prepared meat loaf and pies my mother had made out the door because she had received a last minute phone call that prevented them from leaving on time. My brother was so horrified he peed in his pants. Helping him clean up, we hid in his bedroom while our parents argued. I wondered how my mother was going to explain that one to our suburban and nosy neighbors -- the bastard. My thoughts were pulled forward by the nasal sound of my Uncle Dar's voice calling me and my cousin Jo.

Uncle Dar told me and my cousin Jo to go outside and pull some weeds. After that, we were to wash windows with a smelly homemade vinegar and water solution. My brother played softball in the yard with the male cousins. Personally, I would rather have played softball than wash windows. Watching Uncle Dar and his wife Aunt Annette through the window I really hated them. They always acted better than us. As my father would put it lapsing into southernese, "Their shit don't stink!" Through the

window I watched Uncle Dar's potbellied frame return to the refrigerator for another round of martinis. My aunts were busy preparing the food: fried chicken, potato salad, baked beans and red jello with bananas in it. I felt safer with the women, and began not to feel so resentful about washing windows. Besides, I had a good view of what was going on inside with the adults.

I remembered the events from the day before as the minister's voice droned on inside the hot church that smelled of baked ham and baby diapers from the nursery. My brother's sobbing was beginning to get on my nerves so much I could have screamed out loud. My mother turned to comfort him, giving me a warning look. Life seemed so inconsequential and meaningless as I swung my legs in the pew trapped inside my sailor dress, trapped inside my skin.

After the service, there was a short ride to the cemetery. My father had a military funeral complete with a gun salute at the conclusion. When the last shot was fired my brother really started bawling. I couldn't understand why he was blubbering throughout the entire funeral since my father had been so damn mean to him all of his life. They lowered his casket into the ground and I solemnly threw dirt on top of it and a small decorative wreath inscribed, "From Your Children."

My brother was finally quiet as we drove back to the church. There was food to be eaten, and I discovered the source of the hammy smell during the service. One of the ladies from the church had baked two hams adorned with brown sugar encrusted pineapple rings and pierced with dozens of cloves. The women commented on what a beautiful job she had done, but I didn't care because I hated ham. The men were indifferent to the food. I also hated the way the ladies' dresses smelled like stale Avon perfume mixed with sour sweat. My mother was holding up very well. Everyone commented on how well she was holding up, but I knew it was an act. It was simply my mother's tough southern pride that prevented her from crying. Inside I knew she was screaming.

up for him The men commented on how young my father was to have died. Everyone felt sorry for me and my brother. I could feel their hammy breath blast in my face with their condolences so much that day that I wanted to scream, "We are better off without him!" They wouldn't have understood. All they saw was our nice house, our Cadillac, his professional status and his social standing in the church and community. They didn't know how he really was, which was cruel and tyrannical. Ashamed, I remembered the picture he had drawn several months before he died, of our family with a picture of him holding a gun pointed at my mother, brother, and I. My mother tried to hide the picture from us, but I furtively fished it out of the trash when no one was looking. My father had even written in his precise handwriting our full names and dates of birth written under each one of us with the date of our death, which was to be September 1, 1968. I shivered to think that he had died before we became the victims of his sick mind. A grim smile was on his face in the picture he had drawn, and from that point on we lived in a constant state of fear.

Watching the people gathered around my mother at the church, I just wanted to blend into the wall, the floor, anywhere to get away from everyone, but I couldn't leave my brother. He was hanging on to me for dear life, and I swore right then that I would never have children, or be like my father.

Thirty years have passed since my father chose to take his own life. The hooks still try to hook me, but I know how to avoid their grasp. My mother told me he chose to take his own life for his family, and I believe she is right. I have to believe she is right. If he had admitted his mental illness, she explained, he would have lost face in his profession. Perhaps he knew in a moment of clarity and rationality that some day he would be a danger to himself or others. Probably others. He had confided in her shortly before his death that his biggest handicap wasn't his amputated leg or his heart condition, but his mind. He taught me to stand up for the rights of others, and in the end he stood

up for his own family. I now view his death as an unselfish gift of love to our family that took tremendous courage to carry to fruition on that August morning in 1968.

I have grown up with wounds, but I can now stand equidistant from the memories of my father as I arrive into my own adulthood and look at my own two children. When people ask me how I got the scar on my shin, I simply tell them, "I cut myself shaving when I was thirteen-years old with my mother's razor."

and I can clearly remember her bony old claw grabbing the back of my throat as I tried to flee back through her garden and into the woods. Jill could have escaped, but she refused to leave my side, and we were trapped while Mrs. Forslund called the sheriff. "Get away, leave," Jill hissed between her teeth, "Why the hell did we have to go home?" "The hell which deserves it after what she did to us at the bus stop last winter?" I said. I remembered and remembered how Mrs. Forslund had purposefully thrown dirt on us while splashing us with dirt as we waited for the school bus. We were her back to the back seat in her old turquoise Chevy Impala.

Now we were sitting on Mrs. Forslund's back porch, a porch that was a place of being caught, while she watched us with a vigilant eye. The porch had a red and green scarf, and you could see gray wisps of hair escaping out of the sides of it. I could also see a hideous scarecrow dressed in a pair of blue striped trousers and a mismatched overcoat hanging on a nail on the far side of her garden. I wondered if she really was a witch why she would want to scare crows away? I was on the verge of asking this when the sheriff arrived in his tan and black car. Mrs. Forslund offered us some homemade apple cider to drink, but we waited to see if she drank any of it first before we did. She knew what we were thinking, because she drank a big glass of cider all the way down, setting it down with a satisfied smack of her lips. Jill tried not to laugh. Mrs. Forslund was trying hard not to look too amused as she waited for the sheriff to come around back. Jill was real quiet. I saw the top of her cigarette pack in the

Smashing Pumpkins before They Were a Band

I learned how to smoke cigarettes from my friend Jill around Halloween in October of 1970. It was right after the time of the pumpkin-smashing incident at old lady Forslund's house. We made a huge pumpkin mess all over her driveway one late fall afternoon after school with stolen pumpkins from her garden.

Mrs. Forslund was reputed to be a horrible old witch, and I can clearly remember her bony old claw grabbing the back of my flannel shirt as I tried to flee back through her garden and into the woods. Jill could have escaped, but she refused to leave my side, and we were trapped while Mrs. Forslund called the sheriff. "Goddamit, Jessie," Jill hissed between her teeth, "Why the hell did we have to get caught? The old witch deserves it after what she did to us at the bus stop last winter!" I told Jill to be quiet and remembered how Mrs. Forslund had purposefully driven through an icy puddle, splashing us with dirt as we waited for the school bus. We saw her laugh as she drove away in her old turquoise Chevy Impala.

Now we were sitting on Mrs. Forslund's back porch suffering the humiliation of being caught, while she watched us with a vigilant eye. Her hair was tied up in a purple and green scarf, and you could see gray wisps of hair escaping out of the sides of it. I could also see a hideous scarecrow dressed in a pair of blue striped trousers and a mismatched overcoat hanging on a nail on the far side of her garden. I wondered if she really was a witch why she would want to scare crows away? I was on the verge of asking this when the sheriff arrived in his tan and black car. Mrs. Forslund offered us some homemade apple cider to drink, but we waited to see if she drank any of it first before we did. She knew what we were thinking, because she drank a big glass of cider all the way down, setting it down with a satisfied smack of her lips. Jill tried not to laugh. Mrs. Forslund was trying hard not to look too amused as she waited for the sheriff to come around back. Jill was real quiet. I saw the top of her cigarette pack in the

pocket of her red plaid shirt. My own heart was pounding with proud defiance. The sheriff finally found us around the back and just stared at us. Finally he said to Mrs. Forslund, "You didn't tell me two girls made that mess!"

I felt Jill getting angry by the way she hurriedly gulped the remains of her apple cider. The sheriff and Mrs. Forslund stepped away from us for a moment to hold a conference, but they both kept their eyes on us the whole time. The sheriff sat down and said, "Well ladies, Mrs. Forslund has agreed to make you the following deal since you are girls." "What deal is that?" Jill asked, her eyes flashing with anger. "Since we were girls" meant that the sheriff would supervise us until we cleaned up every single bit of the smashed pumpkins on the driveway. My humiliation deepened.

We were given grocery bags, cheerfully furnished to us by the victorious witch, and we began picking up pieces of sticky pumpkin. Jill hosed the driveway, and I swept. The driveway looked better after we were through. The sheriff was satisfied with everything because he was very full of Mrs. Forslund's apple cider and the cookies he had eaten in his car while he watched us clean up the pumpkin mess. Mrs. Forslund seemed to soften towards us, and agreed never to tell our mothers about what had happened that day. We promised we would never do it again as long as she didn't splash us on purpose in her car. Her face turned red when I mentioned that to her, and she was anxious to get rid of us after that.

On our way home through the woods after the pumpkin episode, Jill offered me a cigarette, and this time I accepted. It was a Salem. Her mother must have switched brands again, or had another new boyfriend. We sat in the woods and smoked without saying a word. She instructed me how to inhale the smoke, and all was silent except for the hooting of an owl in the distance.

The Lammas Tale

*It's Lammas,
Let's celebrate with
The making of bread
And the ripening of the corn,
Before the Christians come!
There is plenty,
There is plenty,
Everyone take some!
Io Evohe!!*

----Modern Irish pagan's prayer

One fourth of July when Jill was almost ten years old, she was discovered sitting on the toilet, solemnly holding an American flag. A Life magazine lay to the left of the commode featuring a story on the Viet Nam War. Now this was in about 1967 or so, and Jill had no idea at the time how symbolic her flag-sitting pose really was. Yet, I have always thought that children have an unusual talent for sometimes being completely right on in their actions. Anyway, this toilet-sitting scene was reported to me by her obnoxious, toadish nine-year old brother Len. He suggested how cool it would be to throw an M-80 firecracker into the unsuspecting stool while she sat. Jill apparently took eons to get out of the bathroom. Fortunately, her family had three bathrooms in their home to select from, so I never understood why this was any type of problem. Both of our families lived in suburban comfort in the late 1960's, safely insulated from the world of the Watts riots or war demonstrations.

Jill was one year younger than me and she was my best friend. There were mostly boys in our neighborhood, so it was natural we would seek each other out. We would climb trees, build forts, and go through great obstacles to avoid these boys. We would play with Barbie and Ken, but Ken would always be the outsider and Barbie's friend

Midge would win out to be Barbie's roommate. We made up endless conversations about how Barbie would break the bad news to Ken that Barbie would rather live with Midge. We would laugh hysterically at each other as we imitated Ken's sad face and Midge's smug smile. If we left our blanket unattended under the maple tree where we played, Len would twist Barbie and Ken into obscene sexual positions and we would pound him with indignant fists until he screamed for us to stop.

One time Jill secretly obtained a Playboy from her mom's closet. I remember we took the stolen magazine to our most recent fort that we had built with old logs. We were high up on a hill that overlooked the subdivision. We laughed at the picture of this woman, naked with her wrists tied to a fence post out in the desert somewhere surrounded by Indians. In the distance some cowboy was riding to the rescue. We both vowed never to let some horrible boy do that to us, and we swore we would fight to save one another from such a disaster.

Our own breast development was a long way off. We used to pull our shirts out with our thumb and forefinger to see how we would look with breasts. We both agreed breasts were absolutely disgusting, and took great pride in being able to pee in the woods like the boys.

I was always more bookish than Jill. She was never a scholar. Sometimes she would come to my door to go bike-riding, and I would say that I was reading and would she please come back later. She never could understand why someone would want to read during summer vacation. The highlight of my week during the summer was the arrival of the bookmobile from the library. Her passion was the ice cream truck, though I have to admit the ice cream truck ran a close second for me.

When I was twelve and Jill was eleven, Jill built the most wondrous fort imaginable. It was constructed within a grove of young maple tree saplings in the woods. She left a map at my house and told me to meet her there later that afternoon. I reluctantly closed my book that afternoon, but I followed the directions to the new fort. I

found the fort easily. She had dug a large hole and covered the top with branches. On the map was a large warning that I was not to step there. I knew immediately she had constructed a trap for boys. I smiled to myself. This fort was more like a hide-out. When she heard me shuffling around outside she said, "You may enter, wise one" in a very sepulchral voice.

I cautiously opened the leafy door and there was Jill, squatting topless and puffing on a forbidden cigarette. It was a Marlboro she had stolen from her mom's purse. Her bare feet were stuck stubbornly in the soft dirt of the floor of her creation. Her face was streaked with dirt and sweat and her tanned legs had scratches all over them.

I stripped my shirt off and joined her in this weird ceremony, but I declined to smoke any of the cigarette. She smoked the cigarette and expertly exhaled. She even showed me how to French inhale and I watched in fascination as the smoke went directly up her nose. I marveled at her ability to do this. We pretended we were hiding out from a band of wild men who captured women to be their slaves. We took turns being the woman and the wild man. We played this game for hours, until the inevitable call for dinner. When we were through, our backs were covered with mosquito bites and our legs were scratched up. We were carefree and wild at this age back in 1968.

In the early 1970's we went through our hippie phase together and wore bandannas around our head or neck. We would lie on my bed, still smoking stolen cigarettes from her mother and listen to Joni Mitchell's soulful voice on the record player. We would talk about meeting the perfect men from California. I would describe my perfect man and how he would be tall, with dark hair worn in a pony tail. He would be an intellectual type that fought for political justice. We would have these deep philosophical discussions late into the night and drink wine by candlelight. She would laugh and say, "Far out, man! That is really cool," and take another drag off of her cigarette. Her ideal man was different from mine. She favored the rugged outdoors type who wanted to live in a log cabin and grow his own organic and natural food. We

planned how we would leave home when she was seventeen and I was eighteen, and romanticized about how wonderful it would be traveling to California in a VW bus with our very perfect hippie boyfriends. This was when the hitchhiking ideal started to bubble between us. We both agreed we would be ready for a practice run the next day.

It was August 1, 1971. I don't know why I remember that date, but I have never forgotten it. Jill and I were dressed in cut-off shorts and work shirts tied up in a knot at our waists. We had on flip-flop sandals and floppy hats. I had a small backpack with stolen cigarettes, a bottle of sloe gin, and a hunting knife. We thought we were ready for anything.

Neither one of us had any real experience with boys. We both had been kissed, but these kisses were more like dry pecks. We were completely uninitiated about what boys and girls do when they make out. Many of the girls from around our neighborhood made fun of Jill and I because they had this over on us. They would walk around smiling smugly with superiority.

Jill and I lived on the state line between Michigan and Indiana. We decided to try the small road on the Michigan side. She practiced sticking her thumb out, cigarette dangling from her mouth, trying to look tough. I tried to keep from laughing. I practiced by casually sticking my thumb out and looking totally unconcerned with whether we got a ride or not.

I gazed at the cornfield. The corn was very high. I watched it wave in the hot summer sun. I felt a sense of expectancy in the pit of my stomach. Jill accused me of not paying attention, as usual. We were both scared, but the adventure of hitchhiking urged us on. We opened the sloe gin for courage and each took a small swig out of the bottle.

We saw our first car in the distance. It was a dark blue car with slanted headlights. A Chrysler, I think, and we struck our poses. We waited, and the car finally

slowed down. Two boys around eighteen years old were in it. They looked us over and stopped and opened the door for us.

Wordlessly we got into the back seat. They asked us where we were going and I said, "Take us to Leeper Park. We want to score." We drove along silently for a minute when suddenly the guy in the passenger seat climbed over the seat and lunged at me, trying to kiss me. His breath stank of alcohol and onions as his ugly paw reached for my breast.

Jill quickly opened the door of the car going around 35 miles an hour and rolled into the weeds at the side of the road. The guy jumped off me in shock, and I watched in horror, fearful that she was seriously injured. The driver slammed on the brakes and yelled, "Get out of my car, you dumb cunt!" I grabbed our backpack and got out of the car before he changed his mind.

As I shut the car door to run to Jill the two jerks screamed after me, "Cock teasing bitches!" I flipped them off, and turned to run to Jill, who lay motionless at the side of the road. I could hear the car screech away behind me.

When I reached her she lay very still. Suddenly she sat up, laughing hysterically, and I could have slapped her. Instead we both started laughing. We held hands and ran to the cornfield and sat down in the warm dirt. I opened the sloe gin and we both took a long drink. We smoked a cigarette, trying to calm down. Then, like kneading bread dough over and over, we began talking about our adventure.

We were silent for a while when Jill began crying softly. She kept saying over and over how scared she was that those two creeps were going to hurt me. Then I started crying because I had been terrified that she had been killed leaping from the moving car. Then we both got real, real quiet. I heard the crows caw mournfully overhead and the soft rustling of the corn in the hot summer wind. I remember our looking at each other's workshirts tied at the waist, braless underneath. Not that we really needed a bra.

She started laughing first, making the juvenile gesture from long ago of pulling the front of her shirt out to make breasts. As if reading each other's thoughts, we stripped the offending shirts off with a flourish and stood up and ran around in a circle waving them in the air. We trampled the corn into a perfect circle as we whooped and screamed. We were proud warrioresses dancing in the corn, our budding breasts thrust defiantly at the sun.

We let out screams, moans, and laughter until, completely spent, we sat down. We lay our shirts out on the ground. I took the hunting knife from the backpack and stuck it into the dirt -- our pledge to the listening universe of our eternal friendship. We solemnly kissed each other on the lips, then giggled. I could taste the sloe gin on her lips.

We smoked another cigarette. This one was a pilfered Winston. She casually remarked, "My mom has another new boyfriend." "My mother does, too," I answered. We both sighed and were comfortable as we lay down holding hands. We were sisters and true friends forever. We fell asleep in the sun, holding hands, nestled in the arms of the August corn on the warm earth, where we were safe for a little while longer.

White girl rich,
shed her skin.
Can't stop now,
climbing in.
Red rock rise,
give shadow that fall.
Butterfly decide to
cross a road.

Sun so bright,
pierce the eye.
Red man aims,
arrows that fly.
White man hisses,
time to die.
White girl ready,
trying to crawl.

Afternoon on a Porch Butterfly where in the Midwest

*The Celtic and Native American worlds merge
symbolically. The butterfly is seen as a
gatekeeper between the world of the spirit
and the world of the mundane.*

The afternoon stretches thin as a spider web
Lemonade stagnates in antique mason jars,
as you swing and whistle on the porch swing.

Red landscape,
roll recklessly by.
Desert in the mirror,
white man cry.
Hawk scream warning,
bloodshot sky.
White girl journey,
about to begin.

Red man at a distance,
ride real low.
White man drive,
can't go slow.
Snake on top of
sizzling rock.
Rock so hot,
ready to pop.

White girl itch,
shed her skin.
Can't stop now,
climbing in.
Red rock rise,
give shadow that fall.
Butterfly decide to
cross a road.

Sun so bright,
pierce the eye.
Red man aims,
arrows that fly.
White man hisses,
time to die.
White girl ready,
trying to crawl.

Afternoon on a Porch: Somewhere in the Midwest

I watch your hands
hold another book on
war.

The afternoon stretches thin as a spider web.
Lemonade stagnates in antique mason jars,
as you swing and whistle on the porch swing,
bare feet scraping dry wood with your toenails.

I know you are about to tell

The impatiens in terra cotta pots do not show any
signs of change, since your father
died last night, heaving and gasping into fiberglass tubes,
while you and your brother snorted cocaine from a
rolled one-hundred dollar bill taken from the dying man's
wallet.

because I am Irish.

The next day your mother in a faded lavender dress
wonders who let the chickens into her kitchen.

By God she doesn't want to clean up chicken shit

The day after a
funeral.

Your face no longer holds enough
light for me to see.

Your mind no longer holds enough
thoughts for me to hear.

Instead I am thinking of thick white clouds,
maple trees, and a Brahms symphony as
I swim with smiling fish.

The next day you play Mozart's Requiem as
you build another model airplane.

Bread is baking as you speak from across
the oven-warm room.

I am peeling potatoes
in the kitchen sink.

My hands are very white.

You stand behind me and I notice red paint
on your fingernail.

I reluctantly kiss your hand and
continue to peel potatoes,
gently poking out their eyes.

Irish Divorce

I watch your hands
hold another book on
war.
Another page turns and
I smell the beer on your
breath as your toes curl
like tightly wound snails.
I know you are about to tell
me something about another battle --
Ardennes, Okinawa, Flanders.
It's always about some battle
fought by men.
Good British men like your ancestors.
I wouldn't understand he tells me
because I am Irish.

It is quiet as the bed
rocks beneath us.
Shadows from the streetlight
roll across the tattered wall.
Your face no longer holds enough
light for me to see.
Your mind no longer holds enough
thoughts for me to hear.
Instead I am thinking of thick white clouds,
maple trees, and a Brahms symphony as
I swim with smiling fish.

The next day you play Mozart's Requiem as
you build another model airplane.
Bread is baking as you speak from across
the oven-warm room.
I am peeling potatoes
in the kitchen sink.
My hands are very white.
You stand behind me and I notice red paint
on your fingernail.
I reluctantly kiss your hand and
continue to peel potatoes,
gently poking out their eyes.
The unlistening wall.

Sometimes we play chess.
You always choose black.
I move my white queen and you
try to capture me with your
bishop.
I think:
The bishop from the church
walks at night and the moon
always follows.
He never steps on sidewalk cracks and
is careful not to be seen.
The bishop is getting older and
has never been captured by the queen.
I move my white queen,
and finally defeat the bishop.

A December fly lands on the face of
our anniversary clock which runs
on batteries and never needs
winding.
My womb is empty as a spent
artillery shell.
He watches another war documentary.
I listen and count model airplanes
dangling from the ceiling.
I listen and count battleships multiplying
in the window.
I kneel and touch the point between his brows,
the television the only witness as
the voice of the British narrator drones on.
*....30,000 British citizens were killed in that battle,
war is such a shame, a dreadful pity really....*
I think of the 2 million Irish dying in the Famine.
*....Not to worry, the United States will come to
Britain's aid...*
I think of the Irish rebellion of 1916.
I take his hand and think:
Bloody British bastards!
...War really is a pity...
The voice fades and the documentary is over.
While phantoms of model ships are poised for battle,
on the unlistening wall.

Raymond and Roseanna

Summer Solstice, 1991

Lighting candles on the pier of our lake on the summer solstice of 1991 shortly before my thirty-fifth year, I also burn the dried rose petals on a smoldering charcoal block inside a brass bowl from Mexico that I have saved since the summer of my twentieth year. Dozens of brightly colored roses that my father has thrown around the pier and their smell overpowers everything, but they cannot overcome the smell in the air of a storm about to explode moving closer. The wind shifts a gust up over the southeast and I taste the salt in the swollen air. Weeping willow branches bend and groan as the wind blows stronger. The candles are safe inside the jars, but the water becomes more brutal in its assault as the storm clouds gather. In the dark, I raise my arms to the sky and throw my head back, crying along the rainbow to bring me love and blessings. Vibrating with intensity, I feel the heat and excitement rise and spread from the soles of my feet to the top of my head like hot, molten wax. Lightning cracks the sky open like a theater curtain, and remembering the storms of rainbow-colored lightning in the desert of Arizona, I see Lydia's face appear in my mind as the first drops of rain begin falling on my moist skin. The hot, fragrant odor of the roses permeates the air and seeps beneath my damp skin. Still standing naked and alone with my arms raised, the wind rises and the rain falls faster and sharper on my body, yet I choose to remain motionless in the wind, the rain, and the lightning because the ritual isn't complete. A big gust of wind blows my altar into the lake and the roses quickly scatter across the water and disappear. The two red candles remain burning in their jars. Even the water from the rain and sharp gusts of wind cannot extinguish them. My heart slows down as I finish the solstice ceremony, yet I am invigorated.

Raymond and Roseanna

I.

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Lighting candles on the pier of our lake on the summer solstice of 1991 shortly before my thirty-fifth year, I also burn the dried rose petals on a smoldering charcoal block inside a brass bowl from Mexico that I have saved from the summer of my twentieth year. Dozens of brightly colored roses from my garden lie strewn around the pier and their smell overpowers everything, but they cannot cover the smell in the air of a storm about to explode moving closer. The wind starts to pick up out of the southeast and I taste the salt in the swollen air. Weeping willow branches lash the ground as the wind blows stronger. The candles are safe inside mason jars as the wind becomes more brutal in its assault as the storm is about to break. Standing naked and alone in the humid darkness, I raise my arms to the sky and throw my head back, boldly asking the universe to bring me love and blessings. Vibrating with intensity, I feel the heat and excitement rise and spread from the soles of my feet to the top of my head like hot, molten wax. Lightning cracks the sky open like a theater curtain, and remembering the streaks of rainbow-colored lightning in the desert of Arizona, I see Lydia's face appear in my mind as the first drops of rain begin falling on my moist skin. The hot, fragrant odor of the roses permeates the air and seeps beneath my damp skin. Still standing naked and alone with my arms raised, the wind rises and the rain falls faster and sharper on my body, yet I choose to remain motionless in the wind, the rain, and the lightning because the ritual isn't complete. A big gust of wind blows my altar into the lake and the roses quickly scatter across the water and disappear. The two red candles remain burning in their jars. Even the water from the rain and sharp gusts of wind cannot extinguish them. My heart slows down as I finish the solstice ceremony, yet I am invigorated.

My husband is sleeping in the house, unaware of what I am doing. Hoping that he is passed out from drinking by now I run up the stone steps to our house, and barely miss being seen by a person in a car coming around the bend on the lake road. Drenched with sweat and rain, laughing maniacally, I shake my hair and open the screen door running for the shower, leaving large, muddy footprints on the kitchen floor. I have always performed these little ceremonies, but this one was one of my best productions. A crack of thunder shakes our lake cottage violently, and I hear the crash of our chimney as it falls off the roof and hits the ground. My body tingles when the hot water from the shower hits my skin. Afterwards, drying my skin with a soft towel, I smirk at my husband's drunken snores rising up through the heat register from his bedroom in the den downstairs. I check on Caleb, our four-year old son, and he is sound asleep.

The storm during the night has knocked our chimney to the ground, and tiny bits of roof lie splattered on the ground next to the fallen bricks from the chimney. Caleb is excited by what the storm has done to the chimney. He says, "Mommy, I could hear wolves outside last night. Lots of them!" I answer, "I could hear them, too!" I hug him close to me. Joseph is getting ready for work, and is not amused. His blue uniform pants, stretched over his bloated stomach, are too tight from drinking too much beer. The job he is on repairing the fallen electrical lines will get him home later at night for a few weeks. I am glad he will be gone because I need the time to think. He kisses me good-bye, and as he leaves for the day reminds me to call the insurance company about the fallen chimney. Almost as an afterthought he says, "Roseanna, there aren't any wolves here -- why do you always have to feed Caleb's imagination?" Calmly smiling and pretending to understand his concern for our son, I promise to be careful about what I say around Caleb. He finally gets into his truck and drives away. Today is my day off and there are errands to run. I always take Caleb with me. My first errand is to go to my workplace and collect my paycheck so I can pay the overdue electric bill before they turn

myself, Caleb and I go inside to get my paycheck. It unnerves me the way he simply stands there smiling and staring at me as if he can read my thoughts. I stop to get a drink of water for Caleb, and am about to lift him up when Raymond comes from behind and lifts Caleb up for me. He speaks as if we are sharing an intimate moment. "You carry heavy things all week, let me help you." I notice how tall Raymond is, and feel uncomfortable about letting him help me. I am not a short woman, but I also can't help thinking how Joseph would never help me with Caleb like that. I thank him, but he stands there as if waiting for me to continue speaking. Thinking of nothing more to say, I nervously brush past him, the skin of my arm barely touching his, and taking Caleb's hand rush purposefully to the door. He follows us out the door with a broom in one hand and a bag of trash in the other. "Roseanna," he calls. Turning, I see him standing, holding an envelope that looks suspiciously like the ones our paychecks come in. "Aren't you forgetting this?" I think, oh my God -- my paycheck! Letting go of Caleb's hand, I walk to where Raymond is standing. Irritated, I snap, "How did you get that?" He answers simply, "I knew when you would be coming, so I worked outside until you got here." Not bothering to hide my growing exasperation with him I sputter, "And you took my paycheck?" "No, no Roseanna! I know you don't like coming in here and talking to the supervisors so I got your paycheck when I got mine. I only wanted to help make your day off pleasant!" The sincerity that shone in his dark brown eyes showed that he really was telling the truth, and I felt ashamed that I was so irritated with him. I lowered my voice and answered, "I apologize for yelling at you Raymond. I just have so much to do today, and there never is enough time in the day to do it all with my husband working all of the time. Thanks for your concern. I've got to go now. I'll see you tomorrow, OK?" He responds, "I didn't know you had a temper Roseanna," and quietly gives me my check. He picks up his broom and trash bag and walks toward the parking lot with his head down. As I walk away, all I can think about is how he pronounces my name, and how it sounds softer and more beautiful in Spanish.

that I call them by their first names. They loved my name and kept insisting that I was favored by the virgin because roses were her special flower. I didn't feel like I was favored by anyone, and I would nod my head in agreement. They liked me and I liked them, and I was glad for the companionship because it was very lonely living with Dale. Lydia and Manuel were in their late twenties, but they seemed so much more worldly than I was at that time. Manuel helped pick crops for a living and Lydia washed dishes where I worked a couple of nights a week. There were a lot of people like Lydia and Manuel who lived in our neighborhood.

Dale always worked late, or so he said, and neglected me. I was miserable living with him in Arizona and I had no real friends. Sometimes Dale would hit me, and one time Manuel had seen him do it. I remembered the compassion in Manuel's eyes as Dale pushed me into the dirt and pulled my hair while calling me names. I don't think Manuel ever hit Lydia because they were always laughing and smiling with one another. The day Manuel had seen Dale hit me, Dale became very ill with a high fever. Lydia had come over and given him some pungent-smelling herbs to help the fever because we didn't have the money for a doctor. He was sick for four days and nights. There were so many times I wanted to leave Dale and leave Arizona, but after the strange illness he never hit me again.

As I turned the corner for our first errand at the electric company I brushed tears from my eyes and Caleb asked, "Are you all right Mommy?" "Yes, Caleb," I replied, "Mommy is all right." My thoughts continued while we were waiting in the line at the electric company. The line was long because it was the end of the month. My thoughts continued.

A few weeks after Dale had hit me, Manuel knocked at our door early one morning. He asked me if Dale had been serious about letting him fix our old VW bus. He spoke with urgency, and explained that *la migra* was lurking around in the neighborhood and he and Lydia would have to go back to Mexico. They didn't want to

risk getting caught because of their children. They needed to earn some money quickly. I felt sorry for him standing there because I had witnessed how *la migra* treated illegal aliens in our neighborhood. They would arrest the whole family and not even care how they treated little kids. A lady I waited on at the restaurant worked where they would hold the illegals in downtown Phoenix. She told me the holding area was a puke and urine filled area where the Mexicans were kept before shipping them back on a bus with an armed guard. *La migra* was something not to be fooled around with. I urgently woke Dale and he talked to Manuel. An agreement was reached between the two of them and it was decided that I would take Dale to work and then pick him up later in the repaired van.

On the way to work Dale stopped for coffee at a 7-11. He looked at me and said, "Roseanna, you are getting too fat." Dale liked to humiliate me. I fought back tears and tried smiling at him. His assaults had changed from physical assaults to verbal, but they still hurt as much if not worse than when he hit me. Quickly changing the subject I said, "That's really nice of Manuel to fix our bus for only twenty-five dollars." His round little face made him look older than his twenty-two years as he replied, "Yeah, they're nice people for beaners. That's tough luck they have to go back, but what do they expect?" Dale was very proud of his Teutonic background, but I didn't think it was anything to be proud of. All I could envision were Nazis torturing people the way he liked to torture me sometimes with his cruel remarks. I sometimes thought Dale liked to see people hurt and suffer because he didn't think very much of himself. I kept those thoughts to myself. His remarks made me uncomfortable as I dropped him off at work. "I will call you when I'm through with work. Say, Roseanna, maybe you can keep your head out of the fucking refrigerator!" He winked at me as he walked into his office. Dale had such an ugly ass. What a *pendejo* -- asshole -- as I watched him disappear through the door. It was the perfect word for him. Lydia had taught me that word and I liked the way it rolled off my tongue. My Spanish had improved over the past few weeks. Before going home I

stopped at the library for more books. I could tell the day was going to be hot because the bitter, poisonous juice from the oleander bushes was already forming little pools on the ground.

I was lost in thought with Caleb walking beside me as I paid the electric bill and forgot to get a receipt. I went back inside to get the receipt and returned to the car with Caleb. "Mommy," Caleb asked, "Why are you so sad today?" I slowly replied tousling his hair, "Caleb where do you get such ideas? I am just thinking." As I drove down the road I remembered knocking on Manuel and Lydia's door as if it were yesterday.

Manuel answered the door and I gave him the money he would need for the part and the twenty-five dollars he asked for the labor. When he saw me his face beamed with a smile and he said, "Roseanna, you are very beautiful today." I blushed. Manuel didn't speak English very well, and I assumed this was his way of being nice. Lydia came to the door smiling and said, "Roseanna, if I didn't know you were an Anglo I would swear you were one of us. You are so dark. That blonde in your hair is really something!" Then she laughed. I laughed, too. Lydia's English was much better than Manuel's. I asked where the kids were, and Manuel gave Lydia a look that meant they had been alone. Lydia answered, "We took them to abuela's. Hey, you want something to eat? I just made some gorditas." I could smell the spicy aroma of the food and told Lydia that Dale said I was getting too fat. Manuel and Lydia both looked at me like I was loca or something. "You are not gorda! All you Anglos think you are gorda," Lydia exclaimed exasperated. I went inside to eat gorditas and drink strong Mexican coffee. After eating Lydia exclaimed, "Let's smoke some mota -- OK? It's from Mexico." I nodded. The Saavedra pot was always excellent and would go perfectly with the fine meal I had just eaten. Lydia expertly rolled a joint and the three of us smoked. We talked for awhile and then Manuel went to do the repairs. Feeling really high, I told Lydia I had some important reading to do. Ambling slowly back to our house, I heard Lydia call out, "You take care, you hear me Roseanna. Sometime I will read your cards."

I turned to look at her and she smiled mysteriously at me, her brown eyes like two shiny agates. I told her I would like her to read my cards. She replied, "You come back later this afternoon -- the kids are at abuela's house all day, so it's OK?" I told her I would come back later.

I read the entire afternoon. It was very hot inside because the tin roof on our little house didn't keep the heat out very well. I decided to take a bath. I recalled that the bathtub was one of those old-fashioned tubs with the feet. As I ran the water, I decided on impulse to gather some fresh rose petals from outside and put them in the water with me. I noticed the VW was gone, so I assumed Manuel was taking it out for a test drive. I could hear Lydia singing a song along with the Spanish radio station. When the Saavedra children were at abuela's, things sure seemed a lot quieter. I noticed how I was picking up more and more Spanish phrases lately, as I collected the rose petals. It was contagious.

"Goddamn Mexicans," I said out loud as I prepared the tub and threw handfuls of rose petals into the water. I stripped out of my clothes and looked at myself in the mirror. My hair was very long, and was a light brown color with golden streaks running through it from the sun and my skin was deeply tanned. Lydia was right -- I was very dark from the Arizona sun. My very white breasts stood out like a white pair of socks against dark pants. I started laughing at the sight of myself in the mirror. I could tell I was still fairly high hours later from the mota as I slid into the tub and lay back in the warm, rose-scented water. I noticed the cracked melon-colored walls in the bathroom. We were very poor like the Saavedra family. Seeing my patched and faded overalls hanging on the hook of the bathroom door, I began laughing because they looked so sad with nobody inside of them. Jesus, was I ever high. I pronounced the 'J' in Jesus like the English 'H', the Mexican way. Man, that weed was some powerful stuff, I thought sinking deeper into the water. God, I was a long way from Iowa I thought relaxing even deeper into the tub. The smell from the rose petals filled the tiny bathroom with their

sweetness. Roses out here must be also made of some stronger stuff, I thought. Either that or the pot I had smoked earlier was making me more sensitive to things like that. I felt a pleasant buzzing in my ears that was very soothing. I could hear my heart beating inside my ears as I covered my head with water so I could wash my hair.

In the distance I faintly heard Manuel returning with the VW. I was resting with my eyes closed in the tub when suddenly the bathroom window swung open with a creaking jolt. Sitting up startled, there stood a smiling Manuel and Lydia. They insisted that they had knocked on the door and I didn't answer, so they decided to try the bathroom window because they were worried. I could have been taking a shit for God's sake and they were totally unconcerned that I would have been in the bathroom. Manuel informed me that the VW was ready and I could get it anytime. I didn't know whether to cover myself up or not. Lydia acted like it was the most natural thing in the world to talk to a naked white woman in a bathtub, and I managed to remain as calm and unconcerned as they were about the whole thing. Lydia said, "Oh, Roseanna, with the children still gone, come over and I will read your cards. It's the only chance I will have to do that for you." She smiled at me, and Manuel carefully closed the window, keeping his eyes respectfully off of my body. I got out of the tub and dried off, and put on a rainbow colored tube top that Lydia had brought me from Mexico and wore it under my overalls. Manuel and Lydia said I had great chi-chi's and I shouldn't cover them up with those awful blue work shirts I always wore. I couldn't believe how open they were about discussing things like that as if they were as routine as discussing the weather. They didn't seem to notice my discomfort about discussing my body, which I had grown to hate after living with Dale for the past two years. The bathroom had a pleasant rose smell. I sniffed my wrist and could smell the roses on my skin. I wasn't sure why, but I decided to dry the rose petals and use them later. Scooping them out of the tub, I placed them on some paper towels and put them in the porch to dry. Strapping on a pair of Mexican tire sandals, I left for Lydia and Manuel's house. As I was leaving, I stepped on

a black widow on the top step. I smashed its body with the tip of my sandal, and scraped it off on the bottom step. Looking up, I saw slow-moving clouds high in sky. The air was hot, and I flicked the sweat off of my upper lip with my tongue, tasting salt mingled with the scent of roses that lingered on my skin.

Lydia and Manuel were waiting for me. Manuel grinned and said, "The VW is running beautifully -- you will see." Lydia shooed Manuel out of the room. He played like he was hurt that he was being banished outside. After he was gone, Lydia darkened the room and lit four blue candles, one for each direction she explained. A lone Virgin of Guadalupe candle stood in the center of the circle she had made with the other candles. She heated a piece of charcoal in a bowl and waited till it glowed bright orange and dropped some copal on top of it. The lemony scent from the copal soon filled the air as it made contact with the hot charcoal. Next, she carefully laid her crucifix on the table along with a bowl of salt and some water with rose petals floating in it. The lemon and rose scent that enveloped us was very soothing. She reverently laid everything out onto an oily, plastic pink tablecloth with a tattered lace doily. I noticed her salt and pepper shakers were from Jalisco. She prayed silently to herself in Spanish and unwrapped her cards from a blue silk scarf. She told me to close my eyes and she would concentrate on my reading, but I was feeling my scalp itch as my hair dried. She told me to concentrate very hard on a question of great importance. I closed my eyes and my thoughts drifted. For some reason tears began rolling down my cheeks. What I was praying for was the right man to be in my life. I hated Dale, but I was afraid to leave him. Yet, to go home to Iowa meant living with my alcoholic mother and her abusive boyfriend. As I sat there with my eyes closed, I could see the vision of a man who was very familiar to me. His skin was dark and he had black curly hair. The most distinguishing feature about him was a funny little crescent shaped scar on his left cheek. He was always smiling. He had been appearing in my dreams for the last ten years. Usually he showed up in my dreams after I would go through some hard times in my life. I would wake up after seeing him

and feel peaceful, but no matter how hard I would try I could never see his entire face. This time he was about to turn to me for the first time when Lydia ordered me to open my eyes. She had me cut the cards and then she laid them out for me. She leaned closer to me and said, "Roseanna, I don't really need the cards to read what's inside you." I nodded. My eyes were still wet from the tears. She waited for me to speak, but I chose silence. "Roseanna," she continued, "You are not with the right man. That man he beats you. He hurts you and makes you feel bad. Look into the mirror. You are so beautiful and young." For the second time that day I looked into the mirror she held before my face. I could see a faint bluish glow around my hair. My face looked older, wiser, happier. It was the face of my future. I started crying really hard then. I got out my cigarettes and lit one. Lydia held my hand. "Roseanna, the man you will be with is very near -- he is in Los Angeles -- I can feel him thinking about you. His name begins with the letter 'R'." "Lydia," I barely spoke, "I hope you are right. I don't know how to get away from Dale." "Someday, Roseanna, you will see how easy everything will be for you. Just be patient." The candles and copal were still going strong. Lydia's face looked so wise and kind. The room felt like a womb. We were silent for a long time. The only sound was our quiet breathing. Finally, Lydia picked up the cards and put them back in the silk scarf. She extinguished the flames of the candles with her fingertips, and explained she didn't want to blow my wishes away, and the room fell completely silent. We sat in silence for awhile longer, and she reached across the table and held my hand. I heard Manuel walking around outside and he called out, "Is it safe for me to come back in now?" My eyes snapped open as if being startled from a deep sleep. Lydia rolled her eyes and replied, "Manuel, you can come back now -- Roseanna has to go pick up her boyfriend in a little while." I stood up in the darkened room, and felt very disoriented, but Manuel and Lydia took my arms and led me gently outside. As the three of us walked outside in the late afternoon, I felt very calm and focused. The buzzing in my ears had stopped. The sun was still bright and hot. They both stood and smiled at me

their eyes never leaving my face. Lydia finally spoke, "Roseanna, it was nice knowing you -- la migra -- we are going back to Mexico tonight. Manuel is not legally in this country, and I don't want to be separated from him. Our children will stay at abuela's for awhile." I looked at her and said, "I am going to miss the two of you very much. You have taught me a lot." "You won't forget us Roseanna." Lydia replied, "Remember -- some day your dreams will come true. I promise." I tried not to cry as I walked away from them and went back inside our little house. I went into the jar where I hid money from Dale and took out twenty dollars. Going back outside I called out to Lydia, "Lydia, I have something for you for doing the reading." She stopped and turned. "Roseanna, you don't have to give me anything. I do it for free." I insisted, "Lydia I want you to have this twenty dollars -- please take it -- and always remember me in your prayers." She solemnly took the money, "Gracias, Roseanna. I will always remember you. You have been so kind." We hugged for a long time, and in the morning the Saavedra family were gone. Mexicans. Always coming. Always going.

II.

Caleb and I drive up to the house and he is very sleepy. As we get out of the car I notice two red-tailed hawks circle over the trees across the lake. Carrying Caleb up the steps to the house, I notice the fallen chimney on the ground and I remember that I have to call the insurance company this afternoon. Caleb and I eat lunch, and afterwards I put him in his little bed for an afternoon nap. While he is napping, I start writing a poem:

Los Gitanos

Your voice rises
from the pillow and
taps me on the shoulder.
I am facing west toward the sun.
It is late afternoon, and
shadows like folded clothes,

hang on the wall.
The cat cries at the door.
Ella tiene mucha hambre.
In my dream you call me
Angelita.
Little Angel.
What strange lexicon is this as
you spread my hair into a
peacock tail.
Si, yo soy tu mujer.
La cama.
La silla.
La mesa.

The words flow, the language hot and liquid. I have not written poetry in a long time. I hear Caleb's soft breathing in the next room and see him holding his stuffed rabbit in his little arms. He has seen so much sadness in his young life, I think, and I continue writing the poem:

Arizona mountains scratched
deep holes in the sky as
we traveled to Mexico.
You taught me Spanish phrases.
Rocks hissed, as you
took me to a town,
where the people's eyes
never move.
La tierra.
El viento.
El agua.
El sol.

The phone rings, and I let it ring two more times. I stop writing. I pick up the phone, and it is the Mexican janitor--Raymond. "Roseanna, I was worried about you today when you told me about your chimney -- do you need any help with cleaning up anything from the storm?" I hesitate, remembering I still have to call the insurance company. "It's O.K. Raymond -- the insurance company I am sure will take care of the clean-up. Thanks for your concern." I want to get back to my writing, but I can hear him breathing soft like a

heartbeat on the other end of the phone. "Roseanna -- you take care of yourself, OK?" I reply, "Raymond, you take care of yourself, too." We hang up and Caleb stirs in his sleep. Lighting a cigarette, I continue writing my poem:

*Yo te deseo.
No! No! Yo soy un espiritu libre!
Yo te deseo -- mujer.
Rocks hissed.
Rocks hissed warnings.
Tus ojos.
Tu boca.
Tu cuerpo.
Take me.
Who are you?
Te amo.
No importa.*

By Roseanna Lee Grant
June 22, 1991

I sign and date the poem, and think of Lydia again that day because there are some roses blooming outside the window. I reread the poem and am uncertain how I know the Spanish for the poem. *No importa*, a soft woman's voice whispers.

Feeling very languid after writing the poem, Caleb and I decide to go swimming in the lake. Caleb asks why there are jars on the pier, and I remember my solstice ritual from the previous night. My body burns with the memory, but so much has happened today that it seems like a long time ago. We swim in the lake and I pull him around on his little raft. One of the white roses that I used in my ritual has washed up to the shore. It is very hot. *Hace mucho calor, senora, no?*

Autumn Equinox, 1991

The last Joseph and I no longer ever sleep in the same bed. The last time we were intimate was in early June on his birthday. Somehow I knew it would be the last time when I sent him back downstairs to his bedroom that evening, but I felt nothing but relief. He has moved all of his things into the den downstairs, and I sleep completely alone now. I do not understand this impulse, and he accuses me of having another man. I enjoy sleeping alone. I listen to my music, read my books and have a view of the lake. I name the two pine trees outside the bedroom window Simone and Jean-Paul. Joseph would have no idea who Simone and Jean-Paul even are. I make a good living and can support myself. I don't need Joseph for money. I don't need Joseph for anything.

Raymond still speaks to me at work all of the time, and I have grown used to him. I have even begun to tolerate him getting my paycheck for me every week so I don't have to go inside the factory on my day off. He has convinced me that it is better for me. Caleb enjoys seeing him and there is no harm in that. I find out he is a widower and is almost five years older than me. He thinks I am a lot younger than that, which amuses me. I do notice the way Raymond is always around wherever I am in the shop at work. I also notice the way he tries to discreetly look at my body, but he is always respectful. He hovers around me like a hummingbird who has found his favorite flower. I am pleased.

I also find out he is a part-time student working on his Ph.D and that he loves baseball. He invites himself over to watch baseball with my husband because he tells me he is lonely being a widower. I invite him because he looks so sad, and this gives me an excuse to leave the house if Joseph has a friend over. Raymond always seems sad that I leave a little while after he arrives. After I serve the men food and drinks, I can leave to be with my girlfriends.

Joseph screams at me because I will not have sex with him. It is late September. He says he doesn't mind the separate sleeping arrangements, but can't stand the idea of not having sex. I calmly tell him to hire a whore. He turns me off because he is so crude.

The last time Raymond came over I compared their hands. Raymond held his glass with so much more elegance and grace. His manners were exquisite, though he comes from a poor family, and I find myself being drawn to Raymond, but I am afraid. *Tengo miedo.*

The night after the argument with Joseph I am standing in the kitchen with Raymond after doing a tarot reading for him. He took the reading very seriously. In the kitchen I tell him to be patient and that love will surely some day return to his life. He places his hands on both of my shoulders and I think he will kiss me. *Besame.* I look into his brown eyes as he searches my face. Meanwhile, Joseph in the living room is flirting with my girlfriend, and the moment passes. *Te amo, angelita*, a woman's voice gently whispers in the silence of the kitchen.

Driving my girlfriend home I hope Raymond will be gone when I return, but I see his car still in the driveway as I pull up to the house. Joseph is beginning to get suspicious. As I enter the house Raymond says to me, "Roseanna, I wanted to make sure you arrived home safely before I left." Joseph scowls at his concern and snaps, "The way Roseanna looks, you can tell she can take care of herself, Raymond. Jesus Christ!" Raymond smiles benignly at him completely unperturbed by Joseph's childish outburst. I am not used to such concern and I thank him. Walking to his car the smell of autumn is in the air. Leaves are falling from the trees as we stand for a few moments looking out over the lake, the wind chimes sadly tinkling in the light breeze from the porch. A vermilion-colored moon is rising and an acorn drops to the ground between our feet. I pick it up and put it in my pocket. "Is that for luck, Roseanna?" he asks. Again he places his hands on my shoulders, but quickly removes them as he gets into his car. I wave good-bye as he drives away, and he is gone. *No te vayas. Soy sola.* Looking up I see Joseph watching from the window through the trees. He doesn't speak to me when I go inside. Taking the acorn from my pocket, I put it on the desk in my bedroom next to my books.

It is early October and Raymond comes into my work area and gives me a large envelope. He asks, "Do you need money?" "What would I need money for?" I ask. He stands and stares at me. Finally I tell him, "I have a lawyer, but I don't have enough money saved right now." He thinks this over and replies, "Well you can pay me back, OK?" He walks away and I continue working. What is it with Raymond anyway I think. How does he always seem to know what I need when I don't tell anyone? Lately Raymond has been hovering around me lately more and more like a jaguar waiting to pounce. The women at work were starting to tease me about him. Yet, I marvel at his uncanny intuition.

The following day it is cold and I need a sweater. Going back to the janitor's office I find Raymond and he is reading a book. I ask if there are any extra sweaters around. He looks up from his book tells me will find one and bring it to me, and I slowly return to my work area. After a few moments he returns, and I feel him standing behind me as he gently places a sweater around my shoulders. Very softly he tells me it is his sweater and that it should keep me warm. His fingers lightly touch my shoulders, and with this now familiar gesture, I suddenly remember. *Me recuerdo!* It is only a moment that passes between the two of us, but I don't think he even notices. Hesitantly I place my hand on top of his hand and thank him. His hands are the same size as mine. He walks away, and I can feel him staring at me, but I am afraid to turn around. *Tengo miedo.*

A few days later Raymond comes over to our house to watch the World Series with Joseph. He brings his friend Keith. The men watch TV downstairs in Joseph's den and I stay upstairs and play with Caleb. Raymond comes upstairs for another glass of wine. I shyly tell him I have the poetry he wants to read. I hand it to him and he smiles mysteriously while taking my poetry and says, "Not much longer now." He walks back downstairs to the den. I can hear the baseball game and Joseph swearing at some ball player. I have no idea what Raymond means by "not much longer now." Caleb follows

Raymond downstairs and I can hear him playing with Raymond. I smile. I have an appointment with a lawyer on Monday, which I haven't told anyone about. Not even Raymond. Especially not Raymond. I have put the money he lent me into a secret savings account. Going into my room I look out the window at the lights across the lake. A loon cries out and I close the window.

In the middle of October I ask Joseph to leave. I leave Caleb at his grandmother's house during the ugly proceedings of the separation. My mother never liked Joseph and is only too happy to help me. I don't tell Raymond any of this. I don't tell anyone. We are at work and Raymond asks to come over to see Joseph. I hesitate before telling him that Joseph and I are separated, and that I have filed for divorce and have no idea where Joseph is staying. I tell him I will pay him back as soon as I can. He looks hurt and puzzled. "Why didn't you tell me about this, Roseanna?" I tell him that I didn't want the people at work to know about it yet and that it was none of their business. I notice how his eyes seem to take me in. I also notice his legs when I look down. He touches my shoulder and asks, "Are you all right?" I assure him that I am fine, but I get the feeling he doesn't believe me. I don't believe myself.

It is a warm October Saturday night on my first night alone in the house where I don't have to go to work the next day. The windows are open and I can smell the faint scent of roses. Such peace, I think as I call and check on Caleb and talk to my mother and grandmother. My mother informs me that Joseph refuses to see Caleb, which doesn't surprise me. We talk for awhile. After we hang up, I decide to pack up some of Joseph's things from the hall closet and put them in the den where I am storing his things for him to pick up. I hear a car pull into the driveway. "Shit!" I cry out, "I hope it isn't Joseph!" I carefully pull the curtain back to look and see Raymond getting out of the car carrying a bag of groceries. I can't breathe. I hear him walk up the steps and he knocks on the door. I wait. He knocks again. I open the door and he looks surprised. "Roseanna, I know this is unexpected, but I thought I would cook you something to eat. I

am very worried about you." I can't believe this. "Raymond, I am already too fat and don't need anything to eat." He waits at the door. Finally I say, "Well come on in-- I am just packing up some of Joseph's things -- maybe it will help build up my appetite." Raymond comments on all the detritus around the room. I automatically correct his pronunciation and he asks if I have a dictionary. I tell him there is one in my bedroom on the desk and continue to clean the closet. He is quiet for awhile and I forget he is even there. Suddenly he calls out from the bedroom, "You are right, Roseanna -- it is detritus with the long 'I' sound." He steps back into the living room holding the dictionary out for me see. He can be so serious sometimes, and I look at him and start to laugh. He raises his eyebrow as he looks at me and starts to laugh, too. We are quiet for a few moments and he becomes serious again. "You know I read your poetry. I have never met a poet before." I look at him like he is crazy. "Raymond it's just poetry -- nothing special. I am just some goddamn worker now in some awful shop. My education means nothing there." He answers, "Roseanna, you are not a goddamn worker in an awful shop! You are a woman -- a very beautiful woman. And you are not fat." I start laughing hysterically, and he joins my laughter. It feels good to laugh. "OK Raymond, you have somehow managed to convince me -- you can make me something to eat. I am hungry now, but I will eat only if you eat with me." Dropping the dictionary on a chair, he goes into the kitchen, and the cat follows him. I find Joseph's yellowed underwear in the closet, a bowling trophy, and his baseball card collection. I also find a note from a woman he must have been having an affair with while we were married dated July of 1991. He certainly didn't wait long after the last time we had sex, I think. I feel nothing but a mixture of disgust and indifference.

I smell the food cooking, and see Raymond busily tidying up my very messy kitchen. I hurriedly throw the rest of Joseph's things into a box and decide to take a bath. I am dirty from cleaning up the den all day. I tell Raymond I am going to take a bath as I lock the bathroom door behind me. The kitchen is next to the bathroom and I

push the heavy bathroom scale against the door for good measure. He calls through the door, "Roseanna, do you like cilantro?" I answer, "Put whatever you like in the food, I am not fussy when someone else cooks." I am grateful there is no window in the bathroom. What if he needs to know where something else is in the kitchen I think. Would he try to open the door? I remember the time Manuel opened the bathroom window in Arizona. You never know with Mexicans, I think, as I begin to run the water. Raymond never once tries to open the bathroom door, and I am vaguely disappointed.

Putting on an old floor length flannel nightgown from my grandmother with little pink roses on it, I make my entrance into the kitchen. As I enter, I notice Raymond has arranged the vegetable omelets he has prepared on my best plates that I never use. He has also picked some brave leftover roses from outside and put them in a spaghetti jar. The food smells good. Tucking one leg beneath me, I sit down to eat. "Have you ever had cilantro before?" he asks. "No, I have never tried it, but it smells very good." I bite into a piece of cilantro and my body feels warm all over. I begin to feel nervous around Raymond because I have never been alone with him before. He is looking at me with his full attention as I eat my omelet. I compliment him on how good it tastes and that I am not used to having someone cook for me. I tell him I appreciate his thoughtfulness. He seems pleased and changes the subject by telling me his favorite poem I wrote is "Los Gitanos." He didn't know I spoke Spanish. I tell him I speak only a little bit, and that I have had associations with Mexicans all of my life so I have picked up a little Spanish here and there. I tell him I used to live in Phoenix, and that I lived in a Mexican neighborhood. He takes all this information in as if it were priceless, but looks sad for a moment when he replies, "You lived in a barrio? That's like where I grew up in L.A." I answer, "Yes, it was a barrio." I answer him very carefully, rolling the two 'R's and pronouncing the 'B' like the English 'V' in the word 'barrio.' I want to show my respect for him and not offend him in any way. "You pronounce the Spanish very well,

Roseanna. It's like it is a natural language for you." I start to relax. He stares at my throat, and his eyes stay respectfully above that point of my body as we continue talking.

After I clear the plates away, we go and sit down in the living room. We are quiet for awhile and I stare at my feet and clasp my knees tightly. I can hear him breathing softly beside me and I don't know what to do next. A soft rose-scented breeze with a hint of rain blows in through the window. Suddenly I turn to say something to him and he clasps me in his arms, and I start to cry. I tell him I have been through so much. He understands and tries to soothe me. It feels right to be in his arms as he holds me very tightly. I feel like a child even though I am a woman of thirty-five. A strong woman.

He holds me for a very long time, then gently lifts my chin and possessively begins to kiss me hard and long. I feel caught in a powerful vision, and my body becomes a silent bystander. Proud and ancient he holds me as his hands sweep my hair, my arms, my back. We roll to the floor and my nightgown disappears, the sleeve flung out in a gesture of surprise over the arm of the couch. The cat excitedly scampers across the floor around our bodies. Arriving at some distant, silent place that never before had a name, a time, or a face, I look into his eyes and see that his eyes are open watching me as he enters the sanctuary of my self. I cannot look, but the vision continues, and closing my eyes again I see revolutions, wars, injustices spin wildly out of my range of vision. Everything seems conquerable as our bodies spin together through the universe leaving a recognizable pattern for some higher intelligence governed with true reason to interpret. Our pattern is different, yet familiar. Opening my eyes I see his brown hand on my tanned shoulder. I am darker than him. His teeth flash in the dark and I recognize him again for the first time, but I am no longer afraid. *Yo le conozco!* I close my eyes again and I see rapidly moving visions of Aztec cities triumphantly rising and thousands of people rejoicing in the streets. I do not know them, yet I do know them, and they are welcoming me home. *La raza!* Next, I am riding on the back of a burro dressed in a bright white gown holding on to him as he takes me somewhere very hot in the desert.

Blood-red clouds glint in the setting sun as we travel. I am very young and my hair is long and black. My hair becomes long, black snakes with red rubies in their mouths slithering around our feet when we walk together through a rain forest. Pyramids rise in the mist in the distance and strange birds fill the air with their sounds. Brightly colored flowers --- red, orange, yellow -- are everywhere and exotic fruits hang from the trees. I peel visions faster and faster like tight skinned grapes, one after the other until I am exhausted, and our first coupling ends.

I am afraid to open my eyes. When I do, I see his naked body again for the first time in years, maybe centuries, and he is smiling. All I feel is that I have desperately missed him all these long years. Sitting up, I suggest we go to my bed instead of lying on the floor. The bed I have kept chaste since before the ceremony of the summer solstice. Lying on his shoulder we do not speak. Lighting a candle, we reach for one another again, and the vision continues, but this time the images move sinuously, slowly revealing themselves one by one. Forcing my eyes open this time, I see two bright, golden triangles merge at our navels that connect forming a six-pointed star bound together with barely distinguishable silver threads. Golden light spreads surrounding our bodies in its glowing warmth as I witness the consummation of our reunion. The room becomes moist as the moon shines through the clouds, leaving hazy afterthoughts along the wall. Smelling the rain before it starts, I am rendered completely senseless and speechless. Words seem inadequate and no longer useful forms of expression as they become meaningless fragments. Our love sounds translate into an indecipherable, primal language all of their own. Pushing him away, I find I do not have the strength to do so. It is over and the vision stops.

He holds me as I rub my eyes in disbelief. Looking up I ask as almost an afterthought, "But do you love me?" Without hesitation he replies, "Yes, I love you Roseanna. I want to marry you because I have been waiting for you for a very long time." *Te amo tambien*, a soft voice whispers and floats away. My mind tells me this is

impossible. "Roseanna, I really have been planning this for a long, long time. You must already know and believe that!" He grows intense and looks at me very seriously. I can't believe it as I sit up to look at him closer. Moving the candle closer so I can look at his face, I notice for the first time that on his left cheek is a scar shaped like a small crescent moon, and I remember my vision in Lydia's kitchen almost fifteen years ago. He says nothing as I tentatively trace its outline with the tip of my finger, not believing it is really there. I ask him how he got the scar and he tells me that he does not remember, but he thinks it has something to do with a rose bush that he fell into when he was a child. I start to speak, but I let it go. *Paz y silencio*. Now isn't the time to tell him about it all. Laying back down by his side we hold hands as the moon moves behind the clouds changing the contours of light in the room. A bluish glow is cast round the room when I extinguish the candle with the tips of my fingers. I don't want to blow my wishes away. I hear the cat crying at the door, but I don't let her in. I am safe and now can sleep. I hear Raymond breathing softly, but I know he isn't really sleeping. Gently I touch his dark black curls as he lies on the pillow next to me. His hand rests very lightly on my shoulder, and I smell roses outside the window as it begins to softly rain.

I dream.
An ancient soul
rocks inside my womb.
My feet remain strong,
ringed with half-moon calluses.
Peasant feet.
The feet of my ancestors
in the Irish potato fields.
The palms of my hands
hold maps of where
we have been.

I dream.
Of ships crossing the Atlantic
Coffin ships for the Irish.
Thin bodies crushed together
like African slaves.
The hunger — an *gorta mar*.

Woman (In White)

Once I dreamed of a small
village in Mexico.
After the dream,
Magdalena told me my spirit,
had disturbed their family gathering.
Everyone seeing the *guera*
dance slowly around the table,
while a serious man played a flute.
Abuelita silently gave me food.
Magdalena reads maps,
and never gets lost.

My womb grows
silent as a moon.
A ripening avocado.
My husband's brown
hand on my belly
doesn't leave an imprint.
He dreams he offers me
an orange crate for our unborn son.
A feed sack for a blanket.
I smile.
His eyes are serious.
I say nothing.

I dream.
An ancient soul
rocks inside my womb.
My feet remain strong,
ringed with half-moon calluses.
Peasant feet.
The feet of my ancestors
in the Irish potato fields.
The palms of my hands
hold maps of where
we have been.

I dream.
Of ships crossing the Atlantic.
Coffins ships for the Irish.
Thin bodies crushed together
like African slaves.
The hunger -- *an gorta mor*.

Kneeling children, mouths stained
green from eating grass while the
British laugh and get fatter.
White skin didn't save them.
Suffering reaches beneath the skin.
It goes deep within.

My womb finally explodes
in mid-July.
Our son crawls out on his
hands and knees, clutching the
sheet as he screams at the awareness
of his return.
His father smiles.
I say nothing as
I wipe the blood from
his little face and hands.

dressed in white,
carefully prunes dead roses along the wall.
Their purpose spent among
clattering colors—
purple, yellow, sometimes orange.

Meanwhile:
The old apple tree stoops,
and wordlessly soothes the baby
while he cries.

Birthscape

A thousand cities rise and
fall.

His brown eyes,
sharp agates that
penetrate beneath eroded
surfaces of human suffering.
My breasts still warm from the milk,
I rock and hum a tuneless Irish lullaby,
shrouded
by lace curtains that also rise and
fall.
Silent in the summer breeze.

Outside, the gardener,
dressed in white,
carefully prunes dead roses along the wall.
Their purpose spent among
clattering colors--
purple, yellow, sometimes orange.

Meanwhile:
The old apple tree stoops,
and wordlessly soothes the baby
while he cries.

The Red Wagon

It is spring and the red wagon is parked on the hill on the east side of our house. It is a sturdy wagon that he received for Christmas. He helps me do the gardening by loading bits of roots and assorted weeds and putting them into the wagon. After carefully loading his wagon, he hauls the load into the woods and dumps it on the ground into a pile. There is a trail from his repeated trips into the woods. Slowly he returns from the woods and stands quietly next to me waiting for a fresh load of weeds. Glancing over, I see him standing next to me. His four-year-old face has a faraway look as he stands gazing into the woods, as he holds the handle of the wagon. His right eyebrow slightly raises for a second. Suddenly, "Mommy, there's one!" He stoops and pulls a small weed from beneath the moonbeam coreopsis plant his father gave me last July. Holding the weed between his soiled brown fingers, he carefully watches and squeezes the milky juice out of its stem. I say, "Would you please put that in the wagon?" Reluctantly he throws the weed into his wagon as if I had interrupted his thoughts, and I continue weeding, watching him as he carefully hauls another load to add to the growing pile in the woods. I love to work the earth with my hands. He loves to watch.

Now it is late summer, and the corn is bursting on the stalk. The days are shortening like a window shade being pulled down by an old woman, and my garden is at its highest point of fecundity. Weeding and trimming my crescent-shaped garden, I hope that Ix Chel -- Mexican Goddess of the moon -- can see the garden from the night sky as she spreads her light around. The last section to weed is around the indigo colored lobelia that lies prostrate over rocks I have created on a terrace. Today the red wagon is silently lying on its side behind the oak tree in the back yard. I finish weeding and go inside to check on my son, who is inside recovering from having his tonsils removed.

He is very quiet, as I enter the room, and refuses my offers of popsicles and pop. He does eat the yogurt dessert his father made. I picture him years from now telling his lover about the time he had his tonsils out and how he ate the yogurt dessert his father made, and that the popsicles his mother offered him weren't interesting at all. I even made sure the popsicles had some blue ones included in the variety pack. The blue ones taste like stale raspberries. Watching him spoon another bite of the yogurt dessert into this mouth, I picture his lover's face as he tells her this story in some future bedroom with dark green wallpaper with cranberry colored flowers on it. I wonder what this will tell his lover about me and his father? Now all he wants me to do is read about the three billy goats gruff. I have read this story over and over. He likes the troll. So do I.

Soon he recovers from having tonsils removed, and the red wagon is back in action. I hear his screams as he rides it down the hill beside our house with his older brother. Returning to my job, I deliver the mail on my mail route along the river in the fading late summer sun. I have delivered the mail for almost ten years now. I know I am not as sophisticated as the professors I deliver mail to every day. In fact, I am probably not fit to join their world. I may still be unruly and uncouth beneath my proper sheen of a college education, but they still sometimes act better than me. I notice how their hands never get dirty, their bodies don't seem to ache, and they live in comfortable oblivion in restored historical houses. Sometimes they exercise for pleasure, walking with their children and dogs. Their children always seem so bland and polite, with very white skin. Very white, like the moonflowers that open only at night on my south trellis. They would probably eat the popsicles their mothers offered them after having their tonsils taken away, I think. They might even appreciate or notice that there were some blue ones, and they certainly would be too polite to complain.

I dump another letter into the antique mail box at the house where Dr. Schibler once generously spelled and defined the word "Gnostic" for me, after we engaged in a discussion on how pre-Christians received the spirit of the Lord. I already knew what the

word meant, but politely didn't want to interrupt her explanation. Dr. Schibler, a leading feminist scholar at a private university, once called me a "girl", when trying to get my attention so she could mail a letter. I remembered her hollering from the porch, "Girl! Hey girl! Mail this for me, would you?" That time I wasn't so polite as I raised my voice, looking her square in the eye, and answered, "How can a leading feminist scholar like yourself call another woman a girl? I think you are being very hypocritical! I then briskly walked up the stairs to her porch and snatched the letter out of her very clean hand. I noticed how Dr. Schibler's dentures clattered around in her mouth as she spoke trying to apologize. As I was leaving her porch that day, I noticed her little dog liked to shit under her rhododendron bush, and I fervently wished her dog would shit on her faux Oriental rug. Dr. Schibler moved away a few months after that, leaving her Oriental rug hanging over the porch rail, stained with piss from her dog.

The red wagon shines in the sun in the early autumn, but it is empty. It is parked next to the balcony, where he is playing with little colored cars lined up neatly in a row. I can hear his little boy noises as he rearranges his cars. The leaves shiver on the trees, even though it is still warm, as I grill chicken on the old green grill our neighbors gave us. The smell of burnt pumpkins is coming from the house next door, as I hear his voice underneath the balcony, "Now we can park the cars here," as he makes little motor noises. Looking into the woods, I think I see a sparkle of light flitter through the pines, but it is only a piece of stray sunlight. It is nothing, I decide, as I turn the chicken over, noticing the morning glories on the trellis are beginning to turn brown. Looking at my garden below, I notice a very brave zucchini lying stretched out in the dying afternoon sun of my rapidly shriveling garden. The wagon, still empty, waits silently as he continues to play. Watching, my son stands up and looks up at me. The days continue to shorten and the nights grow longer, I think, as I call him inside. It is just the two of us with my husband at a ball game with the oldest. Supper is ready. Grilled chicken, corn

on the cob, potato salad. Food for a postmodern world in the Midwest that will reheat well in the microwave oven.

"Mommy, can we take the wagon outside?" It is now early February, right after Groundhog's Day, and I think the winter has lasted too long and I am tired. I am tired of everything. I am tired of the women on my mail route who get to stay home. Such lies I think that they fed us in the 1970's. I think, women liberate themselves from their fathers and husbands only to be enslaved by a larger and more lethal system run by men. I am very tired. *Je suis fatigued*, a French phrase I learned in high school drifts slowly across my mind. He asks again, "Mommy, will you please pull me in my wagon up the hill?" Such a complete sentence for a four-year-old I think, as I rise to get dressed. He follows me up the stairs and waits in the hall for me to get ready to go outside. As I dress, his voice sounds distant as I hear him talking to himself in the hall. I grow more tired when I think about how the teacher at the daycare wants a social worker to observe him next week because they have concerns about his temperamental outbursts. I picture his teacher as she lowered her voice when she asked me, "Are there problems at home we should know about?" As I pull on my jeans, I remembered being ashamed of my postal uniform, as I shook my head that there weren't any problems at home. What kind of problems, I asked her. I can't find any socks, and look in the dirty clothes hamper. Finding a pair of my husband's work socks, I continue reflecting about yesterday at the daycare.

He is in a daycare with the sons and daughters of professional people like the ones who live on my mail route, and he apparently disturbed their organized little world. The problems your son is having, the teacher explained, are that he refuses to sing the open and shut song before eating his lunch, and refuses to march around in a ring before circle time. After respectfully listening to her concerns, I decided I was going to do nothing to stop him because I didn't blame him. She tried not to show her irritation with me, and continued to reason with me. I insisted there was no reason for her concerns,

though I appreciated her efforts. Acting like everything was all right, I smiled and said the socially appropriate phrases, nodded my head in the right places, speaking very carefully and quietly with her. I became conscious of how I measured my words with precision, and showed no signs of emotion because that is how I have observed people of their class and education act when speaking to one another. Her face grew red, as she walked away to get the social worker's card. When she returned, he looked up at her sunbleached blonde hair and pale face and remarked, "I was good -- I didn't do anything wrong." She ignored him, and handed me a soiled white card with the name of the social worker who was going to observe him. Smiling and walking away from her, I took him to his little cubbie corner and calmly helped him put on his boots and coat, but my hands were trembling slightly. I noticed the cuffs on my uniform pants had mud on them, as I told him that he didn't have to wear gloves today. His teacher frowned at me, taking in my appearance. He carried his gloves, as I took his elephant blanket home to wash. We left, and he obediently got into the van. I snapped his seat belt closed, and he repeated, "I was good today Mommy -- I really didn't do anything wrong." I didn't ignore him, and replied, "I know you were good today."

"Mommy," he calls from the hall. I am sitting on the bed putting on the socks, and I have no idea how long I have been sitting there. My gaze falls to the bent arc of the pine branch outside our bedroom window. The wind is still. "I will be out in a minute -- just wait. We will go soon." He answers, "OK, Mommy. I will wait."

He wants to go for a ride in his wagon around our neighborhood. I am very strong and can pull him up the hills around our neighborhood with ease. He is very excited as I pull him up the hill in his red wagon, but he is cold, and I pull the hood of his jacket over his little maroon knit cap. His dark brown eyes grow wide as he holds on to the sides of the wagon, and he laughs with joy when we sometimes roll over a piece of ice. I notice how brown his skin still is, even though it is the middle of winter.

I am wearing old work boots that I have worn for the past five winters on my job. A man and a woman pass me that I met at a neighborhood block party one time, and I notice their boots look new. She is an attorney and he is some sort of banking officer. They wave and nod and smile, and I wonder if they notice my boots have acquired more miles than their boots. As I pull the red wagon up the hill, I feel like an impostor in our professional, suburban neighborhood. I can't talk to these people about some exciting professional coup I have recently performed. I can only say that I walk nine miles a day on my mail route with a thirty pound bag on my shoulder -- my college degree not relevant in order to perform my job. All I need is a strong body. My thoughts turn to my husband -- a Chicano -- with an advanced degree who works as a janitor at the post office, cleaning the toilets with concentrated effort with a smirk on his face. He is the most dangerous kind of minority to the people at the post office because he has an education, I think. He probably went to a better school than the walking couple did, I think, observing their matching parkas. Seeing the smile on my son's face, I think, it doesn't really matter because he grew up in a ghetto in South Central Los Angeles, and no amount of education seems to be able to rub that off. I could always tell them he is the best educated janitor the post office has ever seen. Watching them struggle up the hill, I wonder what they would think about that. As I climb higher up the hill pulling the wagon, I tell myself that I won't get angry. Not today. The wagon's wheels squeak sharply as we reach the top of the hill, and I can't believe how quickly we have arrived at the top. My breathing is slow and easy as he gleefully claps his hands and laughs about how much fun that was, as we go back down the other side of the hill. I hear the couple behind me -- they are out of breath -- I think she is thinner and younger than me -- how can she be out of breath? The man looks like he plays raquetball during his lunch hour, and his face is red like the wagon from the exertion of climbing up the hill. I smile at them as they reach the top of the hill, but they walk right past me.

We are home again, and I park the wagon next to the lawnmower in the garage. We are not supposed to leave the garage door open in our neighborhood. The head of the neighborhood association rang our doorbell one day to reacquaint me with the subdivision rules and regulations. She was very frothy. I could feel my skin itch in her presence, probably from the soap she used or her shampoo. Her tennis shoes were very clean, but mine had a hole in the heel from the constant walking I do every day. I leave the garage door open anyway because I doubt she would visit me today. Her shoes would get dirty. That rule must be the result of these people's childhood, probably spent in some church camp singing the open and shut song before lunch. I picture their alabaster faces with their mouths opening and closing like a line of clothespins singing in unison. Where I grew up we never sang that song. I have an excuse.

Later that day, we make snow angels in the ice encrusted snow and build some snow people. We slide on the sled, screaming down the hill. Afterwards, I pull up some withered tomato vines from the garden while he watches. He disappears and returns with the red wagon and carefully collects the old tomato vines to haul them to the pile in the woods under the snow. The wagon's wheels leave grooves in the snow, as I hear him say, "Now I will put these on the pile." As I hear the thunk of the wagon as he turns it over to dump the vines on the ground, I notice the earth under the receding snow looks fresh. Patches of grass are exposed, forming concentric circles of green. He returns with the wagon for another load and I say, "There are no more weeds now." I rejoice in the middle of winter when the roots and seeds begin to stir underground, as I take his hand and pull the wagon up the hill behind us. It is very quiet. There is not even the sound of the crows, or snapping branches in the woods from the animals. We park the wagon in the garage and go inside, and close the door for the day.

Monday arrives, and the social worker observes him at the day care. I read her observation sheet and it says:

Name: Esteban G. Valdez Age: 4 Race: Hispanic Parents: Married

He plays quietly and away from the other children. He is building a town with buildings and signs on a mat on the floor. He has little busses, cars, trucks, and vans on the roads. He is very intent on his town. The other children ignore him.

The social worker took careful notes, and her round writing reminds me of the cursive writing we were taught in third grade. She hasn't changed since then I think. Her personality is firmly locked behind her studied neutral face. I have to fake neutrality, and I find it difficult. She probably finds it as easy as a snake shedding skin. She has a habit of batting her eyes as if there is something constantly impeding her vision, as I watch her eyes snap open and shut in rhythmic intervals. These are my observations of her. The report continues:

It is my conclusion that this child is disturbed. He doesn't talk. He doesn't interact with the other children. The teacher reports that he sometimes has angry outbursts when the other children disturb his playthings. Teacher's interactions with the mother have been unfavorable. Lack of a good, educational and cultural environment evident with this child. Counseling recommended.

The last line cuts deep, and I feel involuntary tears spring to my eyes. The social worker softly explains, that if there is anything in the report that I don't understand that she will gladly help me with it. Also, do I need an interpreter? This is too much even for me to take, and I feel my neutrality begin to fade, as the tears in my eyes begin to fall. I don't even try to stop them because I am frustrated by them not understanding anything I say. I manage to tell her, "My son only gets angry when there is a good reason to get angry." She blankly looks at me, and I really feel ashamed of my postal uniform. There is dirt on the cuffs of my pants and sleeves, and a cut on my thumb from a stubborn mailbox with a Band-aid around it. My fingernails are short and my hands are dried out from the cold. My nose is running because it is cold outside, but I look up at the social worker and say in a voice as calm as I can manage, "Why do they have so many programs for the

mentally retarded, but no programs for the socially retarded?" She smiles benignly at me with false understanding, not registering in her mind at first, that the remark is clearly directed at her and other people like her. After that, I wipe the tears from my eyes and clam up. I no longer hear what she is saying because I am totally blocking her voice out from my mind. I concentrate on the garden in our backyard, the pine tree where the crows live, and finally the red wagon -- with its brightly spinning wheels. Turning to my son, I tell him we are going home now, and that we never have to come back here again. He gets ready to go without asking any questions. Sometimes he is too good, I think, as I watch him gather his things. The teacher and social worker keep trying to talk to me, but I continue to ignore them, because I am taking him home. They realize they are getting nowhere with me, and their voices finally fall blessedly silent. As I turn to leave, I look over my shoulder one more time and see the other children obediently lining up for their snack. They all rise in unison and begin singing with the teacher, their brilliant white faces glowing under the fluorescent lights, as the social worker looks on and smiles.

Like the wheels on the red wagon, the seasons change and we have the chance to begin again. He is five-years-old now, and at a new daycare where he is much happier. When I pick him up, he doesn't want to leave because he is playing with his new friends. The new daycare is in the heart of the city in a bad neighborhood, like where my husband and I come from, but it is closer to our jobs. The other mothers have jobs just like mine, and we nod and greet each other pleasantly when we drop our kids off in the morning. The new teacher even smiles at me when she sees me. Sometimes I talk to her for a few moments before taking him home to our neighborhood, which is a lot different than the daycare. But he is happier.

It is finally spring of a new year, and the red wagon still blends in well with the color of the tulips in our yard. I tell him that I am going to walk around the yard and look at my gardens, but he follows me. Telling him about the tulips and the new growth on the shrubs, he listens very closely to what I am saying. He has such understanding, I

think, as I continue to talk about the purple winter creeper and the periwinkle under the oak tree. Kneeling down, I discuss the vegetables I am going to plant later in the spring, as I begin pulling some stray weeds from the flower beds. I thin the winter creeper that has brown leaves, smoothing the ground around each plant. He gets the wagon and starts to collect the debris. The sky is very blue, and the long winter has finally disappeared.

Filling his wagon, he goes into the woods, and I watch as he carefully dumps the wagon over on the ground. I hear him exclaim, "Now I can show Mommy what I did all by myself," as he quickly returns from his trip into the woods. After sifting and arranging the mulch around my tulips, I lay on my back in the grass and close my eyes. The sun is very, very warm, when I feel him standing by me. "Mommy, come look." I ask, "Where is your wagon?" I look up at him and he answers, "I don't need it. Not yet." Standing up, I follow him to the weed pile in the woods, the stickers catching on the polyester material of my slate blue postal uniform.

As I follow him, I see the red wagon gleaming in the sunlight, parked in a clearing in the woods with weeds inside of it. Looking at where the weed pile used to be, stands a vivid cluster of bright yellow daffodils, two tulips -- one pink and one red, with a small circle of winter creeper enclosing them. He says proudly, "I do it, Mommy. Just like you!" Kneeling down I hug him close to me, trying to control my tears, and say, "It's really beautiful, son." He answers, "Don't cry, Mommy." Quickly I brush the hair from his eyes to cover my tears, and he solemnly asks, "Where do I put the weeds now, Mommy?" I tell him that he can make a new pile. He pulls the wagon farther into the woods, and I watch as he carefully selects a new spot then methodically turns the wagon over. He pulls the wagon right side up and returns to where I am sitting next to his small garden. I ask, "How did you do this?" He looks at me, "I don't know Mommy. It grew by itself." He sits beside me and together we look at his garden for a long time in the quiet of the sunlit woods. The sunlight surrounding his little garden is the brightest spot in the woods. After awhile, we stand up and he retrieves his red wagon. I notice there is

a paint chip missing from the side of the wagon, but it doesn't matter. It is still sturdy and bright red. Carefully parking the wagon next to the lawnmower, he takes my hand and we go inside to wait for his father and brother to come home. But for now, it is time for our snack and a story about the witch that turns people nice. We begin to sing, as we leave the garage door open.

I regarded the man out of the corner of my eye. I had seen his family earlier in the lounge. There were about seven or eight people, all huddled together in the sick child's room. Some of them were sitting on the floor, oblivious to the nurses going in and out of the room. They were talking to the sick boy's room and saying prayers. The child's room was not a hospital room. The names on the floor of the Catholic hospital didn't seem to be in the room. One of the women in the room was saying the rosary. The room was filled with clouds of smoke from the sage.

The man was about fortyish with dark hair, but it was interwoven with strands of gray. He was slightly taller than I was, wearing blue jeans and a black T-shirt with a pocket for his cigarettes. The most striking feature about him was a vivid tattoo of a snake in colors of green, red, and black. The right hand the body of the snake twined sinuously up his arm and disappeared into the sleeve of his T-shirt. I sat down at the table with him and he asked me if I had ever talked to me for a little while. I nodded my head. There was something about his presence.

"My son," he began, "he was born with a snake."

"That's a shame," I said.

"We believe that children have the power to make things happen. Do you believe this?" I nodded my head and he continued to talk.

Mother's Day

When I entered the lounge it was semi-dark with only one light burning. I sensed someone else in the room, and turning saw a Mexican man smiling at me with familiarity. I smiled and began to make tea. I was exhausted being at the hospital with my son William, who had become ill on Mother's Day, and was deep in thought.

I regarded the man out of the corner of my eye. I had seen his family earlier in the lounge. There were about seventeen members of the family all huddled together in the sick child's room. Some of them were sleeping on coats on the floor, oblivious to the nurses going in and out of the room. They were burning sage in the sick boy's room and saying prayers. The child's room was next to William's room. The nurses on the floor of the Catholic hospital didn't seem to mind the family's ceremony in the room. One of the women in the room was saying the rosary. Her head was encircled with clouds of smoke from the sage.

The man was about fortyish with shoulder length black hair interwoven with strands of gray. He was slightly taller than I was, and dressed in blue jeans and a black T-shirt with a pocket for his cigarettes. The most outstanding feature about him was a vivid tattoo of a snake in colors of green, red, and yellow. On his right hand the body of the snake twined sinuously up his arm and disappeared under the sleeve of his T-shirt. I sat down at the table with him and he asked me if I minded if he talked to me for a little while. I nodded my head. There was something soothing about his presence.

"My son," he began, "he was born with cerebral palsy."

"That's a shame," I soothed.

"We believe that children born like this are touched by God. Do you believe this?" I nodded my head and he continued his story.

"Today we were at my wife's softball game and little Enrique got hit by a car going about 40 miles per hour. I saw it happen in the rearview mirror of my truck. I saw his little body fly fifteen maybe twenty feet into the air." He paused. I was afraid to look into his eyes, but I think he expected me to look. I looked up and he continued focusing on my eyes real hard as he continued talking.

"I concentrated with all of my might, surrounding his little body with energy. I wrapped his body tight with it like a snake." He stood up abruptly startling me with a flourish of his hands.

"My son, he landed to the ground light as a feather." He made a sweeping motion with his hand with the snake tattoo to show me. I got a better view of the head of the snake tattoo on his upper arm under the sleeve of his T-shirt. The mouth gaped open on the snake's head revealing two large fangs.

"My son only has a small bruise where I grabbed him by the arms when I picked him up from the ground. They are only keeping him here until tomorrow night for observation."

He sat back down looking me solemnly in the eyes and my ears started buzzing.

"I believe you," I replied slowly. This seemed to satisfy him, and we both fell quiet. He drank his coffee and I drank my tea. We began breathing in the same rhythm when suddenly he took my hand into his hand. The hand with the snake on it. He spoke again.

"Your son will be OK. The thing in his belly will be gone."

I interrupted him. "They said he has a growth. His grandfather died of colon cancer."

His eyes gleamed in the light as he held my hand loosely in his hand. His foot touched my foot. I could feel his whole body envelop my body, snug as a cocoon. I heard a rattling sound slightly above my head. Finally he released me, but did not let go of my hand. He smiled at me, his teeth glowing in the faint light from the single bulb.

"Do not worry. Tomorrow by the time the sun goes down you will have good news. I know these things. Like you do." I smelled roses in the room when he spoke as he continued holding my hand. I looked into his eyes and felt the stirring of faint recognition. Finally he seemed satisfied and let go of my hand.

"I must go to my son now. Sleep well." He threw his coffee cup into the wastebasket and left me in the lounge. During this time I had finished my tea, but I didn't remember drinking it. I returned to the room with my son and slept by his side. My dreams were peaceful inside the comfort of the serpent's body. I knew all would be well, and so it was.

Wolf Walk

*The women mix their cries,
And clamor fills the fields:
The warlike wakes continued all the night,
And funeral games were played at new returning light.*

—John Dryden

Aunt May lay dying on an early gray December evening. Bare trees punctuated the scene from her hospital window as the Yule lights flickered around the windows of the other hospital rooms across the courtyard. Arriving at the hospital as the sun slid into hiding for another day, I walked between my mother and Aunt Delaney, listening as they talked in lowered voices, afraid I might hear something I shouldn't hear. The last thing I heard my mother say as we approached the elevator was, "When May starts to have the death rattles, we will have to ask Lily to help us because we need three people." Aunt Delaney lowered her voice even more, "You're right, sis, we can't ask JoEllen. No way! I don't care if she is May's daughter. She's so full of medical terms that she misses the point! That girl has always been full of herself!" My mother hushed her and replied, "Don't worry about it, sis, things will sort themselves out when the time comes." I had no idea what they were talking about -- the things they said were as if they spoke in their own private world. It had always been like that for as long as I could remember -- Aunt May, Aunt Delaney, and my mother always up to something secret.

While driving to the hospital and sitting in the back seat of my Aunt Delaney's oversized Buick, my mother took my hand and asked, "Lily, have you ever seen anyone die before?" I could feel the arthritic bones of her hands twisted like tree roots dig into the palms of my hands. I didn't answer and stared straight ahead. She added, "Well, girl,

what you will see tonight will be like nothing you have ever experienced. You've got to be strong." She withdrew her hand from mine, as if removing a sharp hook. I looked at her face surrounded by the fading light. Her forehead held the wrinkled hexagrams of her life. Her cheek bones were accentuated in the light, and her lips were bright red from the lipstick she had borrowed from Aunt Delaney. "Sis, we are almost at the hospital", Aunt Delaney intoned. I hated when my mother left me hanging with her words. She assumed I knew what she was talking about, but I always felt like there was some kind of subliminal message underneath her words. I knew Aunt May was dying, but it wasn't the first time we had made an unnecessary trip to the hospital only to have Aunt May foil death one more time. Besides, Aunt May was not one of my favorite people, and neither was my cousin, her daughter, Jo Ellen. I was here out of respect for my mother and the rest of the family.

Exiting the elevator, we walked down the corridor to Aunt May's room on shadowed feet, my mother and aunt looking so small next to me -- small, old and delicate. They supported one another as they tried to walk purposefully to Aunt May's room. I still walked between them like a child, but I was lost in a dream from the night before about a wolf. This wolf was like no other wolf I had ever seen before. I dreamed the wolf was a scrawny, grayish white she-wolf with wise glowing eyes that burned right through me.

Remembering the dream I saw the wolf follow Aunt May as she was walking through the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains where she had grown up as a child. In the dream, I was lying on my stomach on a hill watching as the wolf circled my aunt, careful not to walk too close to her. Aunt May walked, not noticing the wolf, dressed in a gown of purple and gold. Staring straight ahead, she kept right on walking. On the hill where I lay the wind moaned through the cottonwood trees and the leaves fluttered like a thousand tiny hands waving in the wind, but my aunt kept right on walking. Suddenly, Aunt May stopped and lay on the ground, stretching her arms above her head with her palms facing upwards. Her eyes were open wide and unstarling as she looked straight up

into the sky. The wolf lay crouching several yards from her feet, and I stopped breathing. I could hear my heart vibrate inside my head like a Tibetan gong. The wolf sniffed the air once, then crept slowly toward my aunt. Creeping closer and closer, I watched fascinated as Aunt May pulled a knife out from between her breasts, plunging it straight into the heart of the wolf as she pounced. I was horrified as I watched them roll and struggle on the ground. Bits of hair and fur were strewn around on the ground mixed with bright red blood, and I heard Aunt May grunting with exertion from the struggle. Abruptly the struggle stopped, and my aunt stood up and started running as if infused with newly discovered energy. She gave me a cursory glance as she ran past where I lay on the hill and disappeared into the woods, waving the bloody knife over her head. The wolf lay silent on her side in a pool of blood. "Lily, Lily?" I heard my mother speaking from a distance, though she stood right beside me. "Are you all right?" She peered at me trying to interpret my silence as we stood outside of Aunt May's room. "I'm fine. Don't worry about me," I reassured her. She and Aunt Delaney exchanged a secret look between them as they left me outside the door and walked away.

The two of them had decided in the car that it would be better for everyone if I watched Aunt May first. I sat in a vinyl aqua-colored chair and began my vigil next to her bed. I watched the respirator force air into Aunt May's lungs; its sound like a wheezing pipe organ slightly off key. Her eyes were glossy slits and her mouth lay slightly ajar. It really did look doubtful that she would live through the night. Her bony hands picked at her gown like a chicken scratching for food on dry ground. The bluish veins, like small tunnels, traveled over the tops of her hands and under the sleeves of her gown. In and out the machine forced her to breathe in unnatural rhythms. Her hands steadily picked at her chest, while her eyes remained half-closed, as if in a dream. As I watched her, I knew this time that she really was dying.

From my chair I knew Aunt May's half-closed eyes were vigilantly watching me and waiting for me to do something. Her daughter, JoEllen a nurse, was taking a

well-deserved nap in the lounge where the other family members were also resting. I had no idea where my mother and Aunt Delaney had disappeared. They were always doing that. One minute they would be right beside you, and the next minute they would vanish as if they were composed of some mysterious vapor. The sun was completely down now, and the shadows in the room had changed. The rhythmic sounds of the respirator had a hypnotic effect on me, and I closed my eyes and focused on the trapped spirit of my aunt like Aunt Delaney had once told me to do. Had she told me to do that? I couldn't remember, but I thought she said it would help Aunt May rest. When did she tell me that? I remember her telling me to just use my imagination. I couldn't remember if she had just told me, or if she had told me a long time ago. In and out went the respirator, blending with my own thoughts, as I began to go deeper and deeper in the twilight state just before sleep.

A nurse crept in on slippered feet and asked if I needed anything, and my eyes popped open for a moment. I told her everything was all right and thanked her. She checked Aunt May's blood pressure, and disappeared. Closing my eyes again, I could feel my aunt's tormented spirit itching to escape from the confines of her deteriorating body. I had to help her on my own in the only way I knew how. Like my Celtic ancestors before me, I was a walker in two worlds: the world of the mundane and the world of spirits and shadows. That much I knew about my heritage. My mother was always telling me that, but I never really understood what she meant. How do you walk in two worlds, I thought, as I reclosed my eyes.

I began dreaming again, and looked for the wolf. Repeatedly scanning the scene inside my head, my thoughts traveled, and soon I could feel the wolf drawing closer. Finally, I saw her sitting on a large gray rock. Her eyes -- topaz yellow -- gleamed in the twilight. She looked at me and began to howl deep and low, and soon my own silent keens blended with the wolf's howl. We harmonized together, our bodies rocking and shuddering from the effort. I moved closer to where the wolf sat and she licked my ears,

and playfully bit my chin. Scanning the rocks for my aunt, I saw her dart from behind a tree, holding the same knife she had used to kill the wolf in my earlier dream. The wolf's howls started again becoming long and low. I tried to comfort the wolf, but her eyes looked very old, sad, and wise as she looked into my eyes. Patiently the wolf and I sat on the rock waiting for Aunt May to approach. I watched as she tip-toed up to where we sat, clenching the knife in her hand. She moved closer and closer. Suddenly, she shrieked, throwing her body on top of the wolf. I sprang out of the way, and kept focusing on the wolf and Aunt May. I watched as the wolf soundlessly rolled on her back, paws in the air as if she was playing, and allowed Aunt May to plunge the knife into her chest again. I could hear the noise of the knife as it crunched through the bone. The wolf softly moaned and lay on her side as the blood pooled beside her in a strange spiral pattern.

Suddenly from the bed Aunt May cried out, "Mama, Mama!" My eyes snapped open and I leaped to ring for the nurse. Aunt May crashed around on her bed and cried out, "Mama, Mama!" Her cry was like a low guttural howl as her fingers frantically clawed at her gown exposing her flattened chest with the ragged scars that encircled her left breast from three open heart surgeries. I rang for the nurse again, and gently lay my hands slightly over Aunt May's chest guiding what little energy she had left back inside of her. I felt like the scene was still part of the dream, and I don't remember why I did what I was doing. Aunt May's eyes gazed into mine, peaceful and less frantic, and she tried to smile, but frowned when she saw it was me.

The nurse and my cousin JoEllen rushed quickly into the room. JoEllen looked at me accusingly. "What kind of mumbo-jumbo did you do to her?" I quickly moved my hands away from Aunt May. JoEllen's face was engraved with anger as she hissed at me like a trapped cat in a tree. "Nothing," I slowly answered. "I am just trying to help." "Help! You aren't no doctor, Lily, why not just get the hell out of here!" I backed toward the door. Aunt May's breathing changed dramatically and she tried to speak. After much effort she managed to croak, "Get this goddamn thing off me!" With an exaggerated flick

of her wrist, JoEllen checked her mother's pulse with a professional air, while the other nurse asked me to describe what had happened. I responded, "I don't know. She just suddenly came out of it." The nurse glared at me and snapped, "That's impossible! No one just comes out of coma just like that!" JoEllen holding her mother, looked at me accusingly, slicing her words with precision, "That bullshit you learned from those goddamn New Age workshops is just that Lily -- bullshit-- why don't you just get the hell out of here?" The only New Age workshop I had been to was on how to understand your dreams, and I hadn't learned a thing. That was the extent of my dealings with the New Age, which I thought was a collection of middle-aged and middle-class women bored with their lives. I hesitated and then softly replied, "JoEllen, how does your medical science always give relief? Aren't there some alternatives? Is it any different from what Aunt Delaney, my mother, and your mother have been doing all of their lives when helping the sick and dying? Isn't it all about what you choose to have faith in?" She growled, "Fuck off, Lily. We aren't living in some outback in the Blue Ridge Mountains anymore with no plumbing." Aunt May looked at me with haggard eyes and spoke more clearly this time, "Don't you try to trick me again, girl!" JoEllen adjusted her sheet and soothed, "Mom, you're tired. You need to rest." Aunt May's eyes, like JoEllen's, bore into mine with accusation as I quietly slipped out of the room, feeling quite shaken, not really understanding what was happening to me.

I didn't feel like answering anymore questions as I searched for the elevator. A man and woman stopped me and asked if I was a minister. "No, I am not a minister. At least not the kind you are looking for." They looked puzzled and continued searching for a minister. I slammed the down button on the elevator. I had to get outside and breathe. I found a quiet wall under a streetlight and pulled out a cigarette that I had borrowed from Aunt Delaney earlier. I hadn't smoked in five years, but I needed something. I couldn't shake the sight of the yellow of the wolf's eyes. I don't remember how long I sat under the streetlight as I watched tiny snowflakes pass throughout the filtered, artificial light and

disappear. I could see the window of Aunt May's room and the shadows of people moving around behind the curtain. I began walking back to the hospital with the taste of cigarette searing my throat.

When I entered the lounge something had definitely changed. The family was talking in excited whispers as I poured myself a cup of coffee. Our family was so large we dominated the lounge with a total of thirteen people holding vigil for Aunt May. They were an odd collection of people, with the years of hardship etched sharply in their faces. Poverty and hard work had taken its toll on my family, as I fondly gazed at them. It was a miracle that me and JoEllen had been able to escape from the situation from which we came, and I remember the aunts scraping ten dollars a week to send to me and JoEllen while we were away at college. I learned that Aunt May was off the respirator and they had moved her to another room because she was breathing on her own. I listened to their conjecturing about how she could have pulled this stunt off and escape death one more time. My mother looked at me thoughtfully as I drank the stale and bitter coffee, listening to them talk. I slipped into a lounge chair in the corner, away from everyone, and rested until it was my turn to watch Aunt May. Around 2:00 in the morning an exhausted JoEllen informed me that it was my turn again to keep watch over Aunt May while the others slept. She kept her voice even as she said, "Don't let anything happen to my mother, do you hear me?" I had no idea why JoEllen didn't trust me, and I speculated that it might have to do with the fact that I had always been able to soothe and comfort people in their time of need, and she was the nurse and supposed to be able to do that better. The plain fact was, most people had always preferred me over her when they weren't well. Yet, I had not chosen nursing as a profession. Instead I wrote for a living at the local newspaper. I responded, keeping the hurt out of my voice, "JoEllen, if you can't trust me by now, you never will. If you are that worried, why don't you come with me?" I remembered the time we were in college and JoEllen had called me after taking an overdose of barbiturates our first year away at school. I had saved her life. Giving me a

sour look she said, "The only reason I am even tolerating you is out of respect for your mother! No thanks." My mother hearing herself mentioned got up and asked JoEllen if she would like her chair so she could rest. Sinking gratefully down in the chair, JoEllen tried to relax. My mother walked with me down the hall to show me Aunt May's new room.

I knew the second I entered the room that this was to be Aunt May's dying room. Room 813. I turned to say something to my mother, but she was gone. Aunt May's breathing was quieter and her hands were folded over her chest. I negotiated the snake-like tubes that surrounded her to adjust the neck of her gown, and laid a cool white cloth on her forehead. She tried to speak. JoEllen had told me earlier that she was on a morphine drip for pain. Aunt May struggled to speak. I waited. Finally I whispered, leaning close to her ear, "You know you are one of the bravest women I know." She rasped, "Bullshit, girl! Why do you keep coming in here to help me die?" She tried to open her eyes, grabbed my hand instead and held it close to my chest. Her grasp was remarkably strong, like that of a frightened child crossing the street for the first time. Her hand burned into mine like a hot brand as I closed my eyes helping her relax. The wolf appeared in my mind, but now she was healthy and sleek, as she disappeared from view. Aunt May tried to open her eyes to look at me, then closed them still holding my hand whispering, "You have the touch, girl. Even JoEllen ain't got that touch," as she slipped back into sleep. I kept on holding her hand, and then gently released my hand from hers, straightening the sheet. She looked like a child as she lay on her pillow, as I took her hand into mine again.

My mother tried to walk quietly into the room, but the creaking heels on her old shoes betrayed her. She edged closer and sat down. "What'd she say, honey?" I shook my head. Slowly, Aunt May released my hand and a soft breeze caressed the face of me and my mother as we watched over Aunt May. A sweet perfume, like apples, filled the air around us. I asked my mother, "What's that smell? It's so familiar." Patiently my mother

answered, "I don't know Lily, it's always the same thing when someone dies." My mother sat in the chair beside me, leaning into my body as we began spontaneously humming a tuneless melody side by side as if urging Aunt May that it was all right to leave. Aunt Delaney quietly entered the room, sat beside us, and also joined our humming. After awhile, the soft, ancient singing of the *cael-sidh* floated around us, the beauty of the tones beckoning Aunt May that it was all right to begin her journey home to *tir-na-nog*. As Aunt May's death rattles began to fill the room, her breathing became rapid as it rasped in and out of her lungs. Without saying a word the three of us began sponging Aunt May's wasted body with clean soap and water. Aunt Delaney pulled a small bottle of eucalyptus oil and dropped a few drops into the water. My mother rubbed rose oil on her hands as she began gently washing Aunt May's body, and soon the room was filled with the mingling of scents mixed with the strange perfume. We combed her hair and carefully slipped her into a clean white gown. I marveled that she was as thin as a child, as we turned her body to wash her back. After washing her body, Aunt Delaney stood at the foot of the bed and my mother stood at the head of the bed. They directed me to hold my hands over Aunt May's naval, and directed me to guide her spirit on its way. I had no idea what I was doing, but somehow the motions were natural, familiar gestures, as my hands trembled over the spot they indicated. My mother and Aunt Delaney kept their eyes closed, their lips silently moving in some unintelligible prayer. There was a ragged beauty and familiarity to this ritual as we prepared her body for the final journey, and my mind returned to the wolf, who now lay sleek, shiny, and smiling on the moonlit rocks, her teeth flashing in the dark. The wolf rose from the rocks and walked into a sunlit clearing in a forest, where a woman in white stood at the door of a house inside a tree. I wanted to walk through the door, but the woman held her hand up to stop me. She did not speak, as I turned to walk away.

Uncle Wilson, Aunt May's husband, entered the room. I looked at the clock on the table and saw that it was after 3:00 in the morning. Where had the time gone? I felt

like I had just arrived. I couldn't believe it was already time for him to keep watch. Aunt May's breathing was quieter, and came in short breaths. My mother led me from the room and Aunt Delaney followed. Aunt Delaney went back to the lounge, but my mother wanted to go to the hospital chapel and light candles. Sitting in the pews my mother asked me, "What did Aunt May say?" "She didn't really say anything, Mom," I carefully answered. My mother looked at me as if she didn't believe me. Finally she spoke. "Lily, answer me. Have you had the dreams?" "No mother -- not really." I was afraid to tell her about the wolf. She waited for me to continue speaking, but I chose silence. "Well, when you feel like it you can talk about it with me. Let me know. I may not be as educated as you are Lily May, but I do understand some things!" I hated when she got like that. I never put her family down for their lack of education. Silence enveloped us, as her lips moved in prayer. I could hear her say:

*I sing praises to the great Lady,
Who watches over us,
May she grant us blessings
For a quick release,
And a safe journey home
For my sister May.
Blessed Be!*

She spoke the ancient Celtic prayer with reverence and belief, and I watched fascinated as her face changed from young, to a woman my age, to the crone that she was now. I didn't think she heard me as I said, "I will Mom, I promise. Some day I will tell you everything I know." She abruptly stood up and we walked back to the lounge to rest. I lay in a battered lounge chair to sleep. I didn't sleep soundly and was vaguely aware of the rest of the family coming and going. Toward dawn I slept soundly, but was awakened by the sound of a large bird flapping its wings above and behind me. I felt the air move in waves around my body, and I knew Aunt May's time was near as I reluctantly opened my eyes. I looked for the wolf, but she was nowhere in sight.

Opening my eyes I saw the small figures of my mother sleeping in a chair next to Aunt Delaney. They had their arms around each other with Aunt Delaney's best coat thrown over them for a blanket. The rest of the family was also sleeping, some on the floor and some in chairs. I visualized my mother's and Aunt Delaney's faces when they were younger sleeping four to a bed in Grandma and Grandpa's rented farmhouse down in Virginia. JoEllen briskly strode in and began making coffee. "Want some, Lily?" I stood up and helped myself to the coffee. She said, "Lily, you were the last person who spoke to my mother before she slipped back into a coma." It was like an accusation suspended in the air. "Really?" I didn't know what else to say. She waited for me to say more. I said, "Are you going home soon?" "Why the hell would you say that Lily. You know I can't just go home!" She was angry. Her pale face puckered like a collapsed flower. "I'm sorry JoEllen. I thought you might want to go home for awhile and get some rest." "For fuck's sake Lily, my mother is finally dying!!" she exploded. Her voice caused some of the other people in the lounge to stir and look at us. Keeping my voice low, "JoEllen, calm down. I didn't mean anything by it. I am trying to be helpful." "Some help you are -- every goddam time you go into my mother's room something happens!" I backed away from JoEllen without saying a word. My mother was awake and I told her I was going home. "Let me walk out with you, honey." I helped her out of the chair and she slowly got to her feet. JoEllen glared at us as we left. Aunt Delaney tried to comfort JoEllen, giving us a knowing look. Deciding to go back in the lounge I tapped JoEllen on the shoulder. She looked up from Aunt Delaney's arms. "JoEllen, your mother said that you have the touch like no one she ever met before. That's what she said." Tears began to fall from JoEllen's eyes, as she buried her face in the comfort of Aunt Delaney's shoulder, as I walked away. My mother, who had been watching from the hall, remarked as I rejoined her, "That was nice what you said to JoEllen, but it's not the truth is it?" "No," I answered simply, "It's not the truth."

My mother and I walked outside together. The air was cold, the sky streaked with purple clouds, as the sun began to rise. We decided to get some coffee. Drinking our coffee my mother said, "You know I wanted to be there with your Grandmother as she made her final journey," my mother started. "What happened?" I asked, preparing to hear what she had experienced with her own mother. "Well, Grandma started breathing very heavy, like when Aunt May had the death rattles -- it was like she was giving birth or something. I remember cause I saw her birth babies at home." My mother's voice lowered. "I was watchin' your Grandma, when all of a sudden I saw these beautiful white cotton-like strands appear on the wall over her bed, and with a soft billowing effect enfold her as her spirit left her body. I knew her spirit was leaving her body, and it reassured me. After a few seconds, the strands disappeared and minutes later she peacefully died." She paused, "I wanted to touch those strands so bad Lily to keep my mother from dying, but I knew it was her time. They looked so soft, yet strong, just like your Grandma, but something held me back." She leaned closer to me and continued, "I was fascinated by them, yet reassured at the same time." She took another sip of coffee. "What do you think they were?" I asked. "I don't know, honey, it was the damnedest thing. It was like nothing I have ever seen before. I was just about your age -- in my fortieth year. No one believed me, Lily, except for Delaney and May. You and JoEllen were only about three-years-old when Grandma died." We were both silent. I could tell my mother was tired because she had lapsed into her southern accent. Finally I said, "Mom, Aunt May is trapped in her body. It seems cruel to me that she has to be trapped like that." I remembered the sound of the bird's wings, and I began to cry. My mother moved beside me and held me, gently patting me on the back like when I was a child. I hesitantly began telling my mother about the dreams. She just held me and listened. I could hear her heartbeat as I cried. I looked for the wolf, but could no longer see her. The rocks lay silent as the sun began to rise.

"Mom, I tried to help Aunt May. I think we made some sort of peace last night. She told me I had the touch like no other." My mother didn't look the least surprised and said, "I know that honey. Aunt May always said you had the gift of healing." She sat silently for awhile, lost in her own thoughts, and I drank the rest of my coffee. She broke the silence saying, "We are a fading breed -- Delaney, May and I. Midwifin' isn't always about birthing babies." She paused and continued, "Honey, I told you what you would experience last night would be like nothing you ever come up to before, but I knew you would be all right." I wiped my tears and she finished her coffee. She held my hand like I was still a small child and walked me to the car. Suddenly I saw the wolf out of the corner of my eye dart vigorously up a hill. "You drive careful, honey," my mother cautioned. She waved as I drove away, her purple scarf furling in the wind.

Driving home I watched the sun finish rising over the river, as the snow fell in gentle flakes to the ground. My husband was waiting for me, and I briefly told him what had been going on. I was so grateful that he had taken care of our sons while I was at the hospital. I lit candles all over the house, and was restless the entire day. The day passed very slowly, and I watched the sun set in the early winter evening.

After the children were tucked into bed, I sat next to my husband and held his hand. We sat in the darkening room watching the lights flicker on our Christmas tree. It started out very subtly, but soon the entire house was filled with the smell of spiced apples. The smell was overwhelming. I had the feeling Aunt May was crossing over to the land in the west. My husband could also smell their heady scent, and asked, "What's that smell, Lily? It's so familiar." I answered the way my mother had answered me the night before, "I don't know, but it's always like that when someone is dying." He looked at me strangely as the phone rang. The tension in my body relaxed as I answered the phone and heard my mother's voice. "She's gone home, Lily. Me, Delaney, JoEllen, and your Uncle Wilson helped her cross over." "That's good Mom. Maybe we can all sleep tonight." She continued, "It was really strange this time Lily." "How's that," I replied. "When she drew

her last breath she threw her arms over her head, palms up, and stared with her eyes wide open as she died. I ain't never seen anything like that." I shivered remembering the first dream encounter with the wolf, and remained silent. My mother spoke again, "No dreams then tonight, Lily?" "No, I won't dream. Not tonight and I hope not for a long time." She hesitated, "Is there anything else your would like to share with me, Lily?" I answered, "Can you smell the apples where you are?" My mother laughed, "Yes, that's just Aunt May saying good-bye. It's always like that." I laughed, too. "Good-night, Mom, I love you, and thanks for teaching me what you know." I could feel her smiling on the other end of the phone, "Well, even JoEllen is beginning to see the light! You would have been proud of her Lily." I asked, almost afraid of an answer, "Mom, one more thing." "What's that, honey?" I knew she knew what I was going to ask. "Why do I keep seeing a wolf?" She giggled like a little girl before answering, "I don't know -- you'd have to ask May because the wolf has always belonged to her. Does that answer your question?" It didn't, but I replied, "Good-night, Mom." As an afterthought I repeated, "I love you." "I love you, too Lily. You are doin' real good, girl." Hanging up the phone, with the scent of apples lingering in the room, I watched the wolf walk into the shadows and disappear.

*I see the agreement by the lake
between me and my life.
She takes me in her arms
and carries me through the iron
gate where the women live
and sing
and pray.*

*All is quiet,
except the pine tree's
gentle leaning
in the breeze.
I am old.
My hands and feet
grow cold.*

Field of Violets

*You go home this night
to your home of winter,
To your home of autumn,
of spring and of summer;*

*You go home to this night to your lasting home,
To your eternal bed, to your sound sleeping.
Sleep, oh sleep in the quiet of quietness,
Sleep, oh sleep in the way of guidance.
Sleep, oh sleep in the love of all loving.*

--Celtic Blessing for the Soul's Release

The *cael-sidh* will sing when
I arrive at the sacred hill
of the kings, O Tara!
The western gate will open and
the sky will burst with
indigo-colored strands of clouds
in the fading twilight.

My time will come at summer's end.
I will descend the wooden stairs,
naked under a cloak with no shoes
on my feet.
I will find my sun-bleached chair and
lie down for the last time in the garden.

*I see the agreement by the lake
between me and my Ma.
She takes me in her arms
and carries me through the iron
gate where the women live
and sing
and pray.*

All is quiet,
except the pine tree's
gentle keening
in the breeze.
I am old.
My hands and feet
grow cold.

*I hear singing in the distance.
I see the people now as the sun
goes down behind the hill.
A field of violets sways
softly in the wind.*

The time has come.
My soul undone.

Vitae

Susan McMinn Pantoja was born in Jersey City, NJ and received her B.A. in English from Indiana University Bloomington. She has been previously published in Indiana University South Bend's *Analecta*, *Bitterroot*, *The Red Queen*, and *No Exit*. She currently teaches English at Riley High School in South Bend, Indiana.